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Fiction and Indeterminate Identity

Penultimate draft. Final version is forthcoming in *Analysis*.

Abstract

Anthony Everett (2005) argues that fictional realism leads to indeterminate identity. He concludes that we should reject fictional realism. Everett's paper and much of the ensuing literature does not discuss what exactly fictional characters are. This is a mistake. I argue that some versions of abstract creationism about fictional characters lead to indeterminate identity. I argue that some versions of Platonism about fictional characters lead only to indeterminate reference. In doing so I show that Everett's argument poses a more pressing problem for abstract creationism than for Platonism. The general lesson is that fictional realists should think more about the ontology of fictional characters in order to discern whether they are committed to indeterminate identity.

1. Introduction

Anthony Everett (2005) argues against fictional realism: the view that there are fictional objects, such as Wonder Woman and her Lasso of Truth. He relies on peculiar fictional stories. I'll focus here on "Bah-Tale", Benjamin Schnieder and Tatjana von Solodkoff's (2009: 139) nursery rhyme that they base on one of Everett's stories.

Bah-Tale

There once was a man called Bahrooh

There once was a man called Bahraah

But nobody knew if Bahraah was Bahrooh

Or if they were actually two

Fictional realists think there is a character Bahraah and a character Bahrooh. There is a puzzle: are Bahrooh and Bahraah distinct or identical characters? It's true in the fiction that they are either identical people or distinct people, but the fiction leaves open which possibility obtains. (Let us suppose that Schnieder and von Solodkoff did not settle in their minds whether Bahrooh and Bahraah are identical in the fiction.) Everett thinks that fictional realists are committed to Bahrooh and Bahraah being, outside the fiction, indeterminately identical characters. After all, it seems arbitrary to say they are identical characters and arbitrary to say they are distinct characters. Everett, along with many other theorists, thinks there cannot be indeterminate identity.¹ He concludes that we should reject fictional realism.²

Richard Woodward (2017) concedes that it is indeterminate whether Bahrooh and Bahraah are identical characters. He argues that this result, contra Everett, is consistent with there being no indeterminate identity. He thinks there is merely indeterminate reference. I am sympathetic to Woodward's approach. Still, the approach is incomplete. Like many theorists in the literature on Everett's (2005) paper, Woodward does not discuss what exactly fictional

¹ Evans (1978) and Salmon (1982) seminally argue for this conclusion.

² Everett, however, articulates and expresses sympathy for a version of fictional realism in Everett and Schroeder (2015).

characters are. This is a mistake. I will show that Woodward's approach is consistent with a version of Platonism about fictional characters but inconsistent with a version of abstract creationism about fictional characters.

The paper will proceed as follows. In §2 I discuss Woodward's approach. In §3 I argue that a version of Platonism about fictional characters leads not to indeterminate identity but merely to indeterminate reference. In §4 I argue that a version of abstract creationism leads to indeterminate identity. In §5 I conclude that Everett's argument poses a more pressing problem for abstract creationism than for Platonism. The general lesson is that fictional realists should think more about the ontology of fictional characters in order to discern whether they are committed to indeterminate identity.

2. Woodward

Woodward accepts that it is indeterminate whether Bahrooh and Bahraah are identical characters. He denies, however, that there is indeterminate identity. A case of indeterminate identity is one in which (a) a sentence of the form 'x is identical to y' is indeterminately true, and (b) the source of indeterminacy is not the terms 'x' or 'y.' Here is an example that might help. Let 'Baldy' refer to whoever is the best bald basketball player. Suppose that LeBron James is determinately the best basketball player and indeterminately bald. Hence, 'LeBron James is identical to Baldy' is indeterminately true. This is not a case of indeterminate identity, however, since the source of indeterminacy is the name 'Baldy.' It is indeterminate merely whether this name refers to LeBron James.

Contrast the case of Baldy/LeBron James with the following example from Peter van Inwagen (1990: 241). Imagine a person, Alpha, walks into a cabinet. Something happens to

Alpha that is so severe that it is indeterminate whether Alpha survives. Subsequently, a person, Omega, exits the cabinet. It is indeterminate whether Alpha is Omega. Van Inwagen leaves open what happens in the cabinet. You may fill in the details however you wish, given your own preferred account of personal identity. It could be that Alpha's psychological continuity becomes disrupted, or Alpha's body is affected in some way, or something else altogether. This case is intuitively different from the Baldy/LeBron James case. 'Alpha' determinately refers to the person who walked into the cabinet. 'Omega' determinately refers to the person who left the cabinet. So, as long as we accept that Alpha is indeterminately identical to Omega, the source of indeterminacy seems not to be 'Alpha' or 'Omega.' Van Inwagen concludes that this case involves indeterminate identity.

Some theorists deny that even the Alpha/Omega case involves indeterminate identity.³ I take no stand here. I aim merely to illustrate indeterminate identity by using the Alpha/Omega case as a potential example. I will consider other cases in section 4.

Back to Woodward. He thinks our concept of *fictional character* is indeterminate. He claims there are two related concepts—character₁ and character₂—and gives the following identity criteria:

character₁x is identical to character₁y iff it is true in the story from which they originate that they are identical.

character₂x is identical to character₂y iff it is not true in the story from which they originate that they are distinct. (Woodward 2017: 660).

³ Other theorists might deny the example is possible by denying that it could be indeterminate whether Alpha survives. See, for instance, Hawley (2011: 100-137) for critical discussion of the Alpha/Omega case and Parsons (2000) for a defense of indeterminate identity.

Here is how Woodward would handle “Bah-Tale.” It is not true in “Bah-Tale” that Bahrooh and Bahraah are identical. Woodward would infer there are two character₁s. It is also not true in the story that Bahrooh and Bahraah are distinct. Woodward would infer there is one character₂. It is indeterminate whether Bahrooh and Bahraah are identical characters, because it is indeterminate whether ‘Bahrooh’ and ‘Bahraah’ refer to two character₁s or a single character₂. Woodward would conclude that this case involves indeterminate reference, not indeterminate identity.⁴

Woodward’s approach is attractive but incomplete. He is committed to there being three objects associated with “Bah-Tale,” such that it is indeterminate merely which of these objects ‘Bahrooh’ and ‘Bahraah’ refer to. This is a substantive metaphysical conclusion. Is it accurate? Are there really three such objects? It is hard to know, even if we grant that fictional realism is true. As I will show, whether we should adopt Woodward’s approach depends, at least in part, on what fictional characters are. I will consider two accounts of fictional characters: a Platonist proposal and an abstract creationist proposal. The first is consistent with Woodward’s approach, but the second is not.

3. Platonism

Platonists about fictional characters (e.g. Wolterstorff (1980) and Zalta (1983)) think characters are eternal abstract objects. Let us consider a representative version of Platonism on which a character is a set of all the properties that are true of the character in the fiction. On this proposal, Emma Woodhouse, from Jane Austen’s *Emma*, is a set of properties, including *is-handsome*, *is-clever*, *is-rich*, and many more. Consider two properties I hereby define.

⁴ Cameron (2012) argues for the same conclusion.

Bahrooh-ish

x is Bahrooh-ish iff x is a man such that

- (i) x is named 'Bahrooh,' and
- (ii) there is a man y such that y is named 'Bahraah,' and nobody knows whether x (where x is presented under the guise 'Bahrooh') is identical to y (where y is presented under the guise 'Bahraah'.)

Bahraah-ish

x is Bahraah-ish iff x is a man such that

- (i) x is named 'Bahraah,' and
- (ii) there is a man y such that y is named 'Bahrooh' and nobody knows whether x (where x is presented under the guise 'Bahraah') is identical to y (where y is presented under the guise 'Bahrooh'.)

Now, consider three sets of properties:

{*Bahrooh-ish*}

{*Bahraah-ish*}

{*Bahrooh-ish, Bahraah-ish*}

Let us suppose that the Platonist account of characters under consideration is correct. We may claim, then, that Woodward is correct; it is merely indeterminate which of these three objects 'Bahrooh' and 'Bahraah' refer to. It is indeterminate whether (a) 'Bahrooh' refers to {*Bahrooh-*

ish}, and ‘Bahraah’ refers to {*Bahraah-ish*}, or (b) ‘Bahrooh’ and ‘Bahraah’ both refer to {*Bahrooh-ish, Bahraah-ish*}. This is a case of indeterminate reference, not indeterminate identity.

4. Abstract Creationism

So far, so good. Now, let us consider another theory of fictional characters: abstract creationism. Abstract creationists (e.g. Braun (2005), Thomasson (1999), and Zvolensky (2015)) think characters are abstract objects that authors create. Let us consider Simon Evnine’s (2018: 140-146) hylomorphist version of abstract creationism. Evnine’s metaphysics is not the only one used by abstract creationists, and many abstract creationists do not give many metaphysical details. Still, for present purposes Evnine’s account is a sufficiently representative example.

Evnine thinks of characters similarly to how he thinks of concrete artifacts, such as statues and teapots. He thinks clay statues are constituted by but distinct from lumps of clay. Similarly, he thinks a fictional character is constituted by but distinct from properties that are true of the character in the fiction. He thinks that, just as a sculptor creates a statue from a lump of clay, an author creates a fictional character from properties. Whereas a Platonist might identify the character Emma with a set of properties—*is-handsome, is-clever, is-rich*, and so forth—Evnine thinks Emma is constituted by but distinct from those properties. Jane Austen, while writing her novel, created Emma from these properties.

The key feature of Evnine’s account for present purposes is the role of intention. He thinks someone must intend to create a character in order to create one. He is not alone. For instance, Jeffrey Goodman (2004: 132) claims that we “actively and intentionally create

individuals such as [Captain] Kirk in writing about them.” Scott Soames (2002: 93) claims that characters, though abstract, are “created with the special purpose of being depicted as, or playing the role of, something quite different.”

Evnine’s account of fictional characters is appealing. Unlike Platonists, he preserves the view that authors create characters. He also gives a unified account of concrete and abstract artifacts. His account, however, is inconsistent with Woodward’s approach to “Bah-Tale.” In order to see why, it will help to consider what Evnine thinks about more familiar cases involving concrete artifacts. Consider three scenarios.

RESTORATION

I take apart my watch in the morning, with an intention to clean its parts. In the evening I put back together all the parts, resulting in a watch that looks just like the watch from the morning. In doing so I intend to restore the original watch.

CREATION

I take apart my watch in the morning. In the evening I completely forget about the old watch and put back together all the parts, with an intention to create a watch. The resulting watch looks just like the watch from the morning.

CHAOS

I take apart my watch in the morning. In the evening I put back together all the parts, resulting in a watch that looks just like the watch from the morning. This time, however, my process is so

sloppy—and my intentions are so jumbled and unclear—that it is indeterminate whether I intend to restore the original watch or to create a new one.

Just as Evnine thinks we must intend to create a fictional character in order to create one, he thinks we must intend to create a watch in order to create one. Accordingly, he thinks in RESTORATION, I do not create a new watch (Evnine 2016: 108). I restore the original one, as I intended. The watch in the evening is identical to the watch in the morning. He thinks in CREATION, I successfully create a new watch, as I intended. The watch in the evening is distinct from the original watch, despite their similarities. He would think in CHAOS, since it is indeterminate whether I intend to create a watch in the evening, it is indeterminate whether I create a watch in the evening or restore the original watch. Call the watch in the morning ‘Watch-1’ and the one in the evening ‘Watch-2.’ It is indeterminate whether Watch-1 is identical to Watch-2. The source of indeterminacy is not merely ‘Watch-1’ or ‘Watch-2.’ ‘Watch-1’ determinately refers to the watch in the morning. ‘Watch-2’ determinately refers to the watch in the evening. For Evnine, this is indeterminate identity.⁵

Evnine would likely accept that “Bah-Tale” also involves indeterminate identity. I will focus on a variant of “Bah-Tale” that is closely analogous to CHAOS. This variant will more clearly show that Evnine is committed to indeterminately identical fictional characters. Consider this one-sentence story.

⁵ Although Evnine does not discuss CHAOS, he considers a case in which it is indeterminate whether someone has created a chair. He thinks this case involves indeterminate existence. (Evnine 2016: 24.) He defends indeterminate identity, too. (Evnine 2016: 22-23.)

Cah-Tale Part 1

There once was a woman called Cahrooh.

Now, consider its sequel.

Cah-Tale Part 2

There once was a woman called Cahraah

But nobody knew if Cahraah was Cahrooh

Or if they were actually two

Let us pretend I wrote the first story in the morning and its sequel in the evening. Let us pretend also that my writing process in the evening was so sloppy—and my intentions were so jumbled and unclear—that it is indeterminate whether I intended for Cahraah and Cahrooh to be the same character. That is, although I created a character in the morning, it is indeterminate whether I intended to create a new character in the evening. Evidently would accept the following. In the morning I created a character, Cahrooh. In the evening, I wrote a sequel about this character and a character, Cahraah. Since it is indeterminate whether I intended to create a character in the evening, it is indeterminate whether I created a character in the evening or merely brought back the one from the morning. It is thereby indeterminate, outside the fiction, whether Cahraah is identical to Cahrooh. The source of indeterminacy is not merely ‘Cahraah’ or ‘Cahrooh.’

‘Cahrooh’ determinately refers to the character of that name in Part 1. ‘Cahraah’ determinately refers to the character of that name in Part 2. In these ways “Cah-Tale Parts 1 and 2” is closely

analogous to CHAOS. Just as Evnine would accept that CHAOS involves indeterminate identity, he would accept that “Cah-Tale Parts 1 and 2” does, too.⁶

Evnine’s approach to “Cah-Tale Parts 1 and 2” is inconsistent with Woodward’s approach. Woodward is committed to there being three relevant objects: two character₁s and one character₂. It is indeterminate merely which of these objects ‘Cahraah’ and ‘Cahrooh’ refer to. Evnine, conversely, would say that it is indeterminate how many relevant objects I created while writing “Cah-Tale Parts 1 and 2.” It is indeterminate whether I brought into existence one or two relevant objects.⁷

Woodward might object that Evnine should think, instead, that I created three artifacts: one that is constituted by { *Cahrooh-ish* }, one that is constituted by { *Cahraah-ish* }, and one that is constituted by { *Cahrooh-ish, Cahraah-ish* }.⁸ It is indeterminate merely which of these artifacts are characters—which of these artifacts ‘Cahraah’ and ‘Cahrooh’ refer to. This objection, however, is *ad hoc*. Consider the analogous claim that during the evening of CHAOS I determinately create an artifact; it is indeterminate merely whether this artifact is a watch (in which case I did not restore the original watch) or not a watch (in which case I restored the original watch). This is implausible. What would the non-watch artifact be? Much more plausible, at least given Evnine’s account, is that in the evening of CHAOS it is indeterminate whether I create anything at all. Likewise, it is much more plausible, at least given Evnine’s account, that in the evening when I write “Cah-Tale Part 2” it is indeterminate if I create anything at all (in addition to creating the story, of course).

⁶ Evnine could avoid this result by following Caplan and Mueller (2015) in accepting that there are brute identity facts regarding fictional characters.

⁷ See Korman (2014) and Friedell (2017) for discussion about whether realists about abstract artifacts are committed to indeterminate existence.

⁸ I will not define these properties here, but they should be understood as being similar to *Bahrooh-ish* and *Bahraah-ish*, which I defined above.

5. Conclusion

Some Platonists may deny that stories like “Bah-Tale” lead to indeterminate identity. Typically, Platonist proposals, such as the one considered above, accept a plenitude of objects. For “Bah-Tale” and similar stories, it is indeterminate merely which objects in the plenitude names like ‘Bahraah’ and ‘Bahrooh’ refer to. Some abstract creationists lack this luxury. For Evnine, there is no plenitude of relevant objects in “Cah-Tale Parts 1 and 2.” It is indeterminate whether there are even two relevant objects. This indeterminacy leads to indeterminate identity.

I have not shown that all Platonists may avoid indeterminate identity. Nor have I shown that all abstract creationists are committed to indeterminate identity. Still, the problem I’ve raised applies to more than Evnine. The problem arises at least for abstract creationists who think an author creates a character only if the author intends to create one. There is pressure on such theorists to accept that sometimes when an author indeterminately intends to create a character (as in the evening when I wrote “Cah-Tale Part 2”) it is thereby indeterminate how many artifacts exist in a way that leads to indeterminate identity. For these reasons, Everett’s argument that fictional realism leads to indeterminate identity poses a more pressing problem for abstract creationism than for Platonism.

How should abstract creationists respond? Some, including Evnine, will accept indeterminate identity. Others might avoid indeterminate identity by insisting there are two (or more) relevant artifacts associated with stories like “Cah-Tale Parts 1 and 2.” This move would be *ad hoc* for Evnine but perhaps better motivated on other abstract creationist proposals.

Relatedly, some abstract creationists might follow Zsófia Zvolensky (2016) and accept that

authors sometimes unintentionally create characters.⁹ The general lesson for fictional realists—of all kinds—is that they should think more about the ontology of fictional characters in order to discern whether they are committed to indeterminate identity.¹⁰

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⁹ See Brock (2010) also for critical discussion of the view that authors must intend to create characters in order to create them.

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