Article

How to Create Indeterminately Identical Fictional Objects

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Abstract: Suppose that fictional objects are abstract objects dependent for their existence and their identity on the creative intentions of their authors. Is an author who intends to create indeterminately identical fictional objects committed to incoherent created objects? My claim is that she is not so committed. I argue that indeterminate identity is an ambiguous notion, allowing for an incoherent interpretation and for at least three coherent ones; and I show that if an author of fiction applies coherent indeterminate identity when creating fictional objects, she succeeds in creating coherent objects, whereas she fails to create fictional objects when she tries to apply incoherent indeterminate identity in her creation. In so doing, I offer a reply to a challenge first raised by Everett against realist philosophers on fictional objects and more recently reproposed by Friedell, allowing for the creation of fictional objects along the lines proposed by Evnine.

Keywords: fictional objects; creationism about fictional objects; indeterminate identity; Evnine; Friedell

1. Introduction

Depending on whether fictional objects are considered existent or not, philosophers split into realists and irrealists. To argue in favour of irrealists, Everett [1] claimed that proponents of the reality of fictional objects would be committed to such objects having paradoxical properties, and—among them—to the paradoxical relation of indeterminate identity. In so doing, Everett imported the disputed notion of indeterminate identity into the debate on fictional objects [1].

As a first move, fictional realists reacted by arguing that they were not committed to indeterminate identity at all: for example, Cameron [3] and Woodward [4] argued that fictional realists are committed to indeterminate reference and not to indeterminate identity [2]. But this response to Everett only works for certain kinds of fictional realists: Friedell [6] observes that Cameron's and Woodward's contentions should be adopted by Platonist realists, while Evnine [7]'s creationism is committed to indeterminate identity.

Now the point at issue is the following: is being committed to indeterminate identity problematic in itself? Is indeterminate identity paradoxical? I will argue that indeterminate identity is an equivocal notion: it allows for an incoherent interpretation and for at least three coherent ones. In addition, I will consider Evnine's [7] abstract creationism and I will show that the proposed theory allows for coherent indeterminately identical fictional objects and not for incoherent indeterminately identical ones. My proposal is therefore a defence of creationist realists (in particular, creationists supporting Evnine's theory) who need not fear incoherence and paradoxes due to the indeterminate identity that fictional entities may incur.

This work is organized as follows. In §2 I present the abstract creationism proposed by Evnine [7] and considered by Friedell [6]; in §3 I claim that the origin of indeterminate identity may be twofold for fictional objects so considered; in §4 I present the different ways (whether incoherent or not) to interpret indeterminate identity; in §5 and in §6 I explain why indeterminate identity originating in each of the two ways presented in §3 need not be incoherent.

2. Fictional Objects as Created Artifacts

Realists about fictional objects are divided between Platonists and Creationists. Platonists maintain that fictional objects are eternal abstract objects "picked out" by authors of fiction [3]; whereas Creationists maintain that fictional objects are not eternal, but are instead created by authors of fiction. Now, the crucial question for a creationist is: what allows for the creation of fictional objects? Following Kripke [14], there has been a long tradition of philosophers who have maintained that pretending to refer, which is associated with the use of names or descriptions introduced for the first time in fiction, is what allows for fictional objects to come into existence [4]. But this is not the version of creationism considered by Friedell, who instead examines Evnine's [7] creationism, according to which the creation of fictional objects does not depend on the intention (the *pretending to refer*) with which names or descriptions are often used in fiction, but rests on the *intention to select a set of properties* for a specific fictional object. According to Evnine, the work of an author of fiction is similar to that of an artisan carving away useless stuff, "the writer works on the relevant set of properties since, in writing the fiction, she "carves away" the property detritus from around this particular set of properties" (Evnine [7], p. 141) [5].

Evnine's idea is that any artefact (either concrete or abstract) is created by "the imposition of form on matter by the maker" (Evnine [7], p. 62) and it is "essentially the result of intentional making by its maker" (Evnine [7], p. 69). In the case of concrete artefacts, the matter is the concrete stuff, and the imposition of form is accomplished through the intentional action by which the concrete stuff is selected and worked out. In the case of abstract objects such as fictional ones, properties are the matter, and the intentional action is the act of selecting the relevant set of properties for the intended fictional object.

The theory of artefacts proposed by Evnine is called amorphic hylomorphism. The fact that an object is constituted by some matter, without being identical to it, is what—according to Evnine—makes his theory hylomorphic. What makes this theory of artefacts "amorphic" is that even though artefacts are taken to be hylomorphically complex, the conditions that allow them to have existence and identity (and to that extent "inform" them) are not part of the objects.

3. The Two Possible Origins of Indeterminate Identity

Once it is allowed that the intentional action with which an artefact is created and used is what determines its identity conditions, it follows quite easily that if an artefact has indeterminate identity, this indeterminacy must be found in the intentional action that determines identity.

It may therefore be useful to carefully consider the intentional action that allows an artefact to come into existence and to acquire its identity conditions. According to Evnine, the author "imposes her mind on the matter" (Evnine [7], p. 145), but this definition has to be better understood. What is in the mind of the author such that it is imposed on the matter? And what sort of action allows this something in the mind to be imposed on the matter?

Let us start to consider what in the mind is imposed on the matter. According to Evnine, *concepts (which correspond to linguistic expressions)* are imposed on the matter (see Evnine [7], p. 21). So, for example, the concept "fictional object" may be imposed on a certain matter [6], but other concepts, too, may be imposed on a matter to maintain its identity through changes: for example, the concept "same fictional object through addition" or the concept "same fictional object through subtraction" may be used in the processes that create and transform fictional objects.

As regards the intentional act that allows the concepts to be imposed on the artefacts, it requires *an attitude by the subject which may be more or less intense*. So, for example, I may have a more or less intense desire for a coffee in the course of making it, whilst an author of fiction may have a more or less intense intention to impose a concept on the matter she has available (i.e., the properties) while writing fiction [7].

Now that the intentional action has been unpacked a little, it is worth asking: where does the indeterminacy come from? Does it derive from the *indeterminate concepts* imposed by the author on the fiction? Or does it come from the *indeterminate intensity of the attitude* in the intentional action? The answer is not univocal. Evnine claims that indeterminacy comes from the concepts used by the author of fiction, and such indeterminacy is inevitably absorbed by the artefacts (see Evnine [7], p. 21); while Friedell states that indeterminate identity comes from the intensity of the intention adopted in the act of creation (see Friedell [6], p. 226). To say it simply, the difference is between indeterminacy in the content of intention (Evnine's idea) and indeterminacy in the mode of attitude (Friedell's idea) [8].

To consider whether indeterminate identity is a problem for an abstract creationist of the sort considered here, the two approaches to indeterminacy should be considered separately. And this is what I am going to do in §4 and §5. But before doing so, I shall further clarify the notion of indeterminate identity in the following section (§4).

4. Coherent and Incoherent Indeterminate Identities

When a person comes across the notion of indeterminate identity for the first time, she may have difficulty in grasping what it means, and she may therefore ask for an example to try and see what it is. But an example—even a good one—is not itself revealing, and the reason is that the notion of indeterminate identity is not univocal, but equivocal instead. In other words, we are not forced by an example to see what indeterminate identity is, because we may have a different characterization of the example and refuse the notion of indeterminate identity the example presupposes. We have therefore to unpack the different notions of indeterminate identity first and then consider possible examples, considering them only as exemplifications of specific definitions.

To present the different notions of indeterminate identity, it is useful to start from the incoherent one, and then proceed to the coherent ones. The incoherent one is adopted in a famous argument by Evans [2] and Salmon [20]. The idea behind the argument is that in order for there to be the case that *a* and *b* are indeterminately identical, it should be acknowledged that *b* has a property (i.e., to be indeterminately identical to *a*) which *a* does not have, and by Leibniz's law known as the indiscernibility of identicals, it can be inferred that *a* and *b* are different. If, then, it is allowed that indeterminate identity between two objects is incompatible with their being different, a contradiction follows.

The argument has been presented schematically in the following way (see Table 1) (read "∇" as "it is indeterminate that"):

Table 1. Schematic argument.

1	$\nabla (a = b)$		Assumption
2	$\lambda x [\nabla (a = x)] b$	1	Property abstraction from 1
3	$\sim\nabla(a = a)$		Assumption
4	$\sim\lambda x [\nabla (a = x)] a$	3	Property abstraction from 3
5	$\sim(a = b)$	1,3	Indiscernibility of identicals from 2 and 4
6	$\perp$	1,3	Contradiction from 1 and 5

This argument uses three rules of inference which can be simply put in the following way:

1. Property abstraction
2. Indiscernibility of identicals
3. Contradiction between indeterminate identity and non-identity

Each of these three rules make important metaphysical assumptions, which can be expressed in the following way:

(1) Property abstraction requires that indeterminate identity is a relation which presumes for its instantiation the definite existence of the related objects [9].

(2) The indiscernibility of identicals presupposes that identity is an all-or-nothing relation: it requires for its instantiation the sharing of all properties; if a single property is not shared, this is sufficient for identity to be denied.

(3) For there to be a contradiction in the above argument, it is taken for granted that the assertion of non-identity is incompatible with indeterminate identity.

If at least one of the above assumptions is cogently denied, indeterminate identity is no longer paradoxical, as Evans' and Salmon's argument is not valid anymore. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that it is possible to deny each of the three assumptions in order to allow for three coherent notions of indeterminate identity. Let us consider the three options in turn:

Coherent notion 1: rejecting property abstraction, assuming that indeterminate identity presupposes the indeterminate existence of an object [10].

Consider, for example, that we want to claim indeterminate identity for an object on its way out of existence. Suppose that object a is slowly decomposing and, at a certain instant of time t, it is indeterminate whether a is still there; we may want to say: "it is indeterminate that there is something to which a is identical at t" (schematically: $\nabla \exists x(x = a)$ at t). But it is completely inadequate to infer that "there is something such as to be indeterminately identical to a at t" [11].

Now, suppose that "b" is the name of object a if a exists at time t; it is therefore indeterminate that "b" refers to an object and, for this reason, it is indeterminate that $a = b$ (schematically: $\nabla(a = b)$); from this we cannot infer that object b is such that it is indeterminately identical to a (schematically: $\lambda x \, [\nabla(a = x)] \, b$), because the indeterminacy of the relation of identity is itself dependent on the indeterminate reference of "b", and, therefore, the property of indeterminate identity cannot be abstracted from an alleged object referred to by "b." For whoever maintains that indeterminate identity presupposes the indeterminate existence of an object, it is quite evident that Evans' argument does not hold, as property abstraction is not allowed.

Coherent notion 2: rejecting the indiscernibility of identicals, allowing indeterminate instantiation of identity.

Suppose that indeterminate identity is a relation between definitely existing objects (excluding coherent notion 1), but that the relation of identity is not an all-or-nothing relation: it allows for indeterminate instantiation. But how can there be indeterminate identity? It may be assumed that *whenever the difference between two objects is exclusively established by the indeterminate instantiation of some property in one and not the other, then it is indeterminate that they are identical*.

Under this assumption, suppose that a statue is covered by a layer of calcareous material. Let a be the statue such that it is *indeterminate that a calcareous layer is part of it*. Let us now call b the same statue with the borders clear-cut to exclude the calcareous layer; we may easily recognize that statue b is such that it is *not indeterminate that a calcareous layer is part of it*. The difference between a and b lies only in an indeterminate property (in one and not in the other) and therefore they are indeterminately identical according to the supporter of coherent notion 2 [12]. If this notion of indeterminate identity is adopted, then the indiscernibility of identicals is not a valid rule of inference, and, therefore, Evans' and Salmon's argument is not valid [13].

Coherent notion 3: non-identity and indeterminate identity are compatible.

Whenever two objects are different, they may have some property in common. Now, it may be conventionally assumed that the sharing of certain relevant properties (and not others) allows for indeterminate identity between different objects.

Suppose, for example, that partial overlapping in space and time is the kind of sharing relevant for the indeterminate identity of different physical objects. Consider now two different amoebas produced by the same one. Now, the two amoebas are clearly different

beings but, if we accept that they were overlapping in space and time before the split, we may want to say that they are indeterminately identical as well.

Following this intuition, we may want to claim that negation of any statement P is to be interpreted weakly, as including not only the counterextension of P, but also the cases in which it is indeterminate that P holds. To put it schematically, it may be assumed that not-P is true if and only if either P is false or P is indeterminate [14]. If this is the case, the final step of Evans' and Salmon's argument is not valid, as indeterminate identity—so interpreted—is compatible with non-identity [15].

Indeterminate identity may therefore be coherently claimed in at least three different ways (i.e., the three coherent notions mentioned above). Now, the relevant question is the following: whenever an Evnine-style creationist claims that fictional objects are indeterminately identical, is she claiming indeterminate identity in at least one of the coherent ways? Or is there a possibility that she is committed to incoherent indeterminate identity? My claim in the following sections is that an Evnine-style creationist is not committed to incoherent indeterminate identity, whatever the origin of indeterminate identity adopted by the theorist.

5. Indeterminacy in Concepts and Connected Indeterminate Identity

To consider whether a supporter of an Evnine-style theory of fictional objects is committed to incoherent indeterminate identity, it is useful to consider separately the two different origins of indeterminacy allowed by the theory. As already mentioned (in §3), the origin of indeterminacy may be either (i) *in the concepts* the author of fiction applies when selecting certain properties for the fictional objects or (ii) it may be in the *intensity of the intentional action* with which the concepts are applied to the matter (i.e., properties) of fictional objects. Let us start by supposing that indeterminacy comes *from the concepts* applied to fictional objects, as Evnine himself [7] claimed; the other option will be considered in the next section (§6).

An author of fiction may apply a coherent notion of indeterminate identity, if she accepts any of the three coherent notions mentioned above. In such cases, the concept of indeterminate identity adopted by the author of fiction would coherently allow such creation. The three examples considered in §3 can be regarded as creations of fictional entities by an author of fiction. In these cases, the indeterminate identity can be consistently produced by such an author.

An interesting question is, what happens if the author of fiction explicitly adopts an incoherent concept of indeterminate identity when introducing fictional objects and tries to select properties for there to be incoherent indeterminately identical objects? Does she succeed in creating incoherent indeterminately identical objects, or not? She does not. Let us consider why.

It is important to note that any creator may fail in her purpose, and—according to Evnine—"the possibility of total failure should not be ruled out" (Evnine [7], p. 125). Suppose, now, that an author of fiction wants to create a definitely existing fictional object, N, which is indeterminately identical with another one, M, adopting the incoherent notion of indeterminate identity assumed by Evans' and Salmon's argument. Now, by their argument, considered above, it follows that N is different from M and not indeterminately identical with M. In such a case, the author tries to apply the incoherent concept of indeterminate identity to properties without succeeding, and in such a case, the creative act merely fails.

These observations may be better understood if it is recognized that, according to Evnine's creationism, the author of fiction uses her own concepts in order to select properties (i.e., matter) and create fictional objects. If the concept she uses is an incoherent notion, this means that the concept itself selects the set corresponding to the intersection of incompatible properties, which is an empty set, and therefore the creative act is vacuous.

Let me try to sum up what I have argued in this section. I considered what happens if indeterminate identity originates in the concepts adopted by the author of fiction. I claimed that there are at least three ways to shape a coherent concept of indeterminate identity

to be applied to fictional objects and, whenever this is the case, indeterminately identical fictional objects may be coherently created by authors of fiction. There may be extreme cases in which the author of fiction adopts an incoherent concept of indeterminate identity when creating fiction: in such a case, I argued that the incoherence prevents the creation of indeterminately identical fictional objects.

6. Indeterminacy in Attitudes and Connected Indeterminate Identity

It may be claimed that the identity and indeterminate identity of artefacts do not depend on the concepts applied to the created artefacts, depending instead on the intensity with which the intentional action allowing their existence is performed. This is the alternative conception of the origin of indeterminate identity proposed by Friedell [6] [16]. It is worth considering here whether the indeterminate identity thus introduced produces inconsistency for a realist about fictional objects (as Friedell claims) or not (as I propose to argue).

Suppose that an author of fiction, after having created a fictional object A, creates a fictional object B with indeterminate intention as to whether it is the same or different from the original fictional object A. One could think that the author of fiction narrates a certain event that happened to a character named B, but has not yet decided whether B is a new character or a previously introduced character named A. In such a case, A and B are indeterminately identical.

Consider whether it is coherent that A and B are indeterminately identical. Suppose that the identity conditions of the fictional characters depend on the intensity with which their individuating properties are intended by the author. Now, A is such that the author determinately intends it to be identical with A, while B is such that the author indeterminately intends it to be identical with A. This is a case in which the indeterminate identity between A and B is coherent if notion 2 (above) of indeterminate identity is applied: the only difference between the objects involved is that one has indeterminate properties the other does not have (in this specific case, the difference being that B is created with an indeterminate intention to be identical to A, while A is not created with any such indeterminate intention).

But there is another possibility which is to be considered. Suppose that, after creating a fictional object A, the author starts to write a text with indeterminate intention as to whether to shape a new fictional object at all or to transform the original one. This is the situation considered by Friedell [6] to present a problematic indeterminate identity for realists about fictional objects; let us consider his words:

"Consider this one sentence story.

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 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." (Friedell [6], p. 226)

This is a different case from the previous one; let us see why. In the previous example, the author creates a fictional character B with an undetermined intention as to whether it is

identical to a previously created character, A. In this second case, the author is uncertain whether to create a fictional character, i.e., he is uncertain about the act of creation itself. In such a case, applying coherent notion 1 of indeterminate identity, we may coherently state that, during the second stage of the text's production, it is indeterminate that a fictional character is identical to the original one because of the indeterminate existence of a character to which the original one is identical. In other words, when an author of fiction has an indeterminate intention as to whether to create a new character at all or to keep the original one, it is indeterminate that there exists a fictional object to which the original one is identical, and, therefore, in such a case, indeterminate identity is dependent on indeterminate existence, as is allowed by coherent notion 1.

Let me sum up what I have claimed in this section. I considered whether indeterminate intentional actions by authors of fiction might originate incoherent or paradoxical indeterminate identity between fictional objects. I argued that it cannot be the case that indeterminate identity so introduced is paradoxical, as indeterminate identity may be instantiated either when something definitely created is indeterminately intended to be identical with something previously created or when it is indeterminate that an author of fiction intends to create a new fictional object or to transform a previous one; and these two options are coherently accounted for in Evnine-style creationism, adopting two of the coherent notions of indeterminate identity considered above (i.e., the coherent notions 1 and 2 presented in §4).

7. Concluding Remarks

This work aimed to defend realist philosophers who argue that the existence and identity of fictional entities depend on the creative intentions of their authors. These philosophers acknowledge the possibility of fictional entities being indeterminately identical if their authors intend them to be so. The problem that arises is this: does the fact that fictional entities can be indeterminately identical condemn the realist to inconsistency? To address this question, I have reconstructed the debate on indeterminate identity, showing that three different notions of indeterminate identity have emerged that are consistent and only one remains inconsistent. I also took care to analyse the notion of creative intention and showed that it can be assumed that either the concepts on which the intention is based, or the intensity of the intentional attitude adopted is relevant. Whatever notion of creative intention is adopted, my thesis is that the author of fiction cannot introduce inconsistency when creating indeterminately identical fictional objects.

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Notes

[1] The dispute over indeterminate identity was originated in the philosophical literature by Evans [2]. Everett [1] imported it into the debate on fictional objects.

[2] For a Meinongian reaction to Everett's argument, different from the one offered by Cameron and Woodward, see Voltolini [5].

3   Platonists distinguish themselves between neo-Meinongians, according to whom there are eternal fictional objects which do not exist (see for example Parsons [8], Zalta [9], Priest [10], Berto [11]), and philosophers according to whom fictional objects exist eternally as types or roles (see for example Wolterstorff [12] and Currie [13]).

4   As is well known, Kripke [14] is the late publication of a series of lectures delivered 40 years before; among the creationists pursuing such ideas, see van Inwagen [15], Schiffer [16], Salmon [17], and Thomasson [18].

5   Paganini [19] defended a version of creationism different from the ones considered here. My claim in this work is simply that Evnine's theory is not problematic for allowing indeterminate identity. My objections to Evnine's theory are not developed here.

6   It may be useful to remind that matter (according to Evnine) is constituted by a set of properties selected by the author. This set of properties by itself is not what allows for the existence of fictional objects; the intentional action which selects such properties is relevant. The point at issue is whether the relevant intention is in the concept used (as it is considered here) or in the attitude of the author (as considered in the next paragraph).

7   It may be objected that intentions do not have a phenomenal character, whereas desires do. It seems, therefore, that intentions cannot have different intensity, as desires do have (thanks to Alberto Voltolini for observing this). However, intentions may be brought forward with more or less intense willpower, and it is such intensity which is transferred to intentions, according to my interpretation of Friedell's position.

8   Thanks to Alberto Voltolini for helping me to be more explicit on this last summarizing observation.

9   This assumption is clearly stated in Lewis [21]. However, philosophers admitting identity—and maybe indeterminate identity— between non-existents (see for example McGinn [22]) would be more cautious. Thanks to Alberto Voltolini for this last observation.

10   The reasoning behind the rejection of property abstraction is as follows: according to the metaphysical assumption underlying property abstraction, indeterminate identity applies to objects that definitely exist, but those who reject the metaphysical assumption also reject property abstraction. Thanks to an anonymous referee for asking me to be explicit about this.

11   See van Inwagen [23] and Hawley [24] for relevant arguments in favour of indeterminate existence, and Korman [25] for arguments in support of the indeterminate existence of abstract artefacts. See Williams [26] for a reaction to Evans' argument along these lines.

12   This is a frequently adopted strategy against Evans' argument. See, for example, Edgington [27], Heck [28], Parsons and Woodruff [29], and Barnes [30].

13   To ascertain that notion 1 is different from notion 2, it is useful to realise that a person can accept one and not the other. Consider a philosopher who holds notion 2: she does not believe that there can be indeterminate existence but accepts that there can be indeterminate instantiation of properties by determinately existing objects. Such a philosopher may claim that statue *a* is indeterminately identical with statue *b* but refuse to accept that indeterminate identity can depend on indeterminate existence. The two notions of indeterminate identity, therefore, do not coincide. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to make this distinction.

14   A strategy along these lines can be found in Garrett [31], (pp. 345–346).

15   To ascertain that notion 3 is different from notions 1 and 2, it is useful to realise that a person can accept notion 3 and reject the other two. Suppose a philosopher who holds notion 3 does not believe that there can be indeterminate existence, or even that there can be indeterminate instantiation of properties. Such a philosopher may believe that the partial overlap of two objects (consider the case of the two amoebas above, for example) brings to the difference between the two and also to the indeterminate identity between the two. Notion 3 coincides with neither notion 1 nor notion 2. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to make this distinction.

16   The idea is that intentions and not properties are essential to individuate the identity of fictional objects. To modify a previously created fictional object, there should be an intention that the object under modification is the same as the previously created one. It, therefore, follows that—for example—supposing that after Cervantes has created Don Quixote, Menard selected the very same properties without the intention to create the same fictional object as Cervantes'; it follows that Menard created a completely different fictional object. Thanks to Alberto Voltolini for highlighting to me this consequence.

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