

## Discussion

### Abstract Generationism: A Response to Friedell

David Friedell has offered a defense of abstract creationism—roughly, “the view that fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes and Harry Potter, are abstract objects that authors create” (2016, 129)—against objections raised by Stuart Brock (2010). Here, I grant that fictional characters are abstract objects and focus solely on issues raised by the *creationism* aspect of the view, as Friedell’s discussion leaves us with open questions on the relation between the creation of fictional characters and authorial intentions. I argue that by distinguishing ways in which authors might generate fictional characters, we can recast abstract creationism so as to shed light on this topic and offer some answers to the questions Friedell leaves open.

#### I. FRIEDELLE’S DEFENSE

Brock (2010, 355) poses a question to the abstract creationist:

WHEN: When (i.e., under what circumstances) do authors create fictional characters?

The abstract creationist should have at least a minimally decent answer to WHEN. Brock and Friedell seem to agree that the best answer appeals to the *intended creation by pretense view*:

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).

Though both seem to agree that this is the best available answer to WHEN, Brock and Friedell ultimately reject ICP. They share a reason: it seems

that abstract creationists should still think that nominalists about fictional characters can create fictional characters, even if they do not intend to do so.<sup>1</sup> Brock and Friedell differ, however, in that Brock concludes that abstract creationism is false, whereas Friedell holds steady, acknowledging instead that the relation between intentions and the creation of artifacts—abstract *or* concrete—is just a complicated matter. If we can (or should) conclude that the mereological nihilist can still make tables despite not intending to make tables, we can (or should) conclude that the nominalist about fictional characters can still make characters despite not intending to make characters.<sup>2</sup>

The take-home message, according to Friedell, is that the relation between intentions and artifactual creation is indeed complicated, but not in a way that leaves the abstract creationist any worse off than the *concrete* creationist—that is, the person who believes that we are capable of creating concrete artifacts, such as tables. There *is* a worry, but it is a worry for most everyone and, hence, not a worry that tells specifically against abstract creationism.

#### II. CREATION AND PRODUCTION

Conceding that the nominalist about fictional characters can create fictional characters despite lacking the intention to do so, Friedell states that “[s]urprisingly, then, one can make an artifact without intending to make anything of its kind—indeed, without intending to make anything” (2016, 134). Emphasizing this surprise, Friedell draws a contrast with Amie Thomasson, who claims that “it not just a causal fact but a conceptual truth that artifacts must be the products of human intentions, indeed of intentions to produce something of that very kind” (2007, 53), and Lynn

Rudder Baker, who claims that “[a]rtifacts are objects intentionally made to serve a given purpose” (2004, 99).

Contra Thomasson and Baker, I take it that we *can* engage in actions that we might (loosely and, as I argue, perhaps not entirely accurately) describe as *making artifacts without intending to make anything of their kind—or without intending to make anything*. Contra Friedell, I find this unsurprising.<sup>3</sup> Suppose I go to the kitchen with the intention of making a sandwich. Suppose further that I am, for whatever reason, *quite* disoriented. Instead of grabbing the peanut butter, jelly, and bread from the fridge, however, I accidentally grab an assortment of vegetables. After going through some motions, I realize what I have done: I have unintentionally made a salad! I had no intention to do so—and in fact had an intention to make something else—but those facts in no way complicate the fact that I have made a salad.

Other examples can be generated. Suppose I am working with my pottery wheel and have the intention to make a clay bowl. I get distracted and make some careless mistakes. I end up making a plate, despite having intended to make a bowl. To my ears, at least, this sounds like a plausible outcome, rather than a claim resulting from conceptual confusion. Similarly, it seems plausible that I can intend to write a novel, but, due to my own misunderstanding of literary classifications, write a novella instead.

In these cases, I still have an intention to make *something*. There are cases, however, in which I make things despite having no intention to make anything. I made footprints in the snow on my way to the coffee shop this morning. I made a small scattered arrangement of dead skin cells when I scratched my beard just now. My furnace makes warmth, as does the sun, as do wildfires. None of these cases essentially involve intentions to make that which gets made.

One might insist that these examples do not involve *artifacts*. Perhaps it *is* a conceptual truth after all that the making of *artifacts* requires intentions—perhaps the fine-grained intention to make an artifact *of a certain kind*, or perhaps the coarse-grained intention to make an artifact *simpliciter*.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps, as Jeffrey Goodman has claimed, “creation normally involves having a goal that one aims to achieve” (2014, 39); more strongly, maybe the very notion of *creation* always involves the intention to create. I am not sure what

to think about these claims, but let us grant them for the sake of argument.<sup>5</sup>

I propose that we distinguish two kinds of *generation*: *creation* and *production*. The former is coupled with an intention to generate; the latter is not. So, when speaking loosely, I might *say* that I “created” footprints in the snow or a small scattered arrangement of dead skin cells or that my furnace “created” warmth, but really what I *mean* is that my furnace and I engage in mere *production*, rather than genuine *creation*. The footprints in the snow are unintentional *products* of my activities, rather than my *creations*. The footprints would thereby fail to be *artifacts*, but I still made them.<sup>6</sup>

### III. POTTER AS PRODUCT

We now have a broader framework within which to think about the act of *generation*. An agent might intend to generate an instance of a given kind of object; if so, that agent *creates* an *artifact* of that kind. Alternatively, an agent (or nonagential entity, such as my furnace) might unintentionally generate an instance of a given kind of object; if so, that agent (or entity) *produces* a *product* of that kind.

Let us tie this back into Friedell’s discussion of fictional characters. Suppose Doyle was a fictional creationist and had the intention to genuinely create an entity—a *character*—when he created Holmes. If so, then Holmes is an abstract artifact. Suppose, on the other hand, that Rowling is a nominalist about fictional characters and had no intention to genuinely create an entity—a *character*—when she wrote the first Harry Potter novel. Harry Potter, then, differs from Holmes in that Potter is not an abstract artifact created by an author. Instead, Potter is an abstract *product produced* by an author. Similarly, some table might be an unintentional product produced by a mereological nihilist’s activities of attempting to arrange some simples table-wise—though we would have to concede, then, that such a table would not really be a created artifact. That might not be so bad, however: just as footprints are still full-fledged footprints whether they are proper artifacts or mere products, perhaps tables can still be full-fledged tables regardless of whether *they* are proper artifacts or mere products. And the same for fictional characters.

## IV. ABSTRACT GENERATIONISM

Friedell concludes that cases such as those involving the nominalist Rowling or the nihilist woodworker demonstrate that we need to rethink the relation between intentions and artifacts, concrete or abstract. I agree, somewhat: while the relation between intentions and *artifacts* is probably clear enough—for present purposes, at least—the relation between intentions and *products* is not. I conclude by offering some hopefully helpful, if ultimately inconclusive, remarks on this matter.

To recast Friedell's central question: how do authorial intentions relate to the *generation* of fictional characters? There seem to be a few ways. Intentions can make those characters *artifacts*, rather than mere products. Similarly, intentions can make those characters *created*, rather than merely produced. It is not clear, however, that any intention at all is required to merely produce a product. The footprints in the snow *might* be the (direct or indirect) result of my intentional activities, but they just as well might not be: I might spontaneously sleepwalk my way to the coffee shop. The production of fictional characters, however, seems different from the production of footprints in at least one important respect: to create a *fictional* character—rather than, say, something more akin to a *mythical object*—one has to be consciously writing fiction, which plausibly requires the intention to write fiction.<sup>7</sup> So, if nominalist Rowling had the intention to write fiction and goes on to do so, then Harry Potter is both a fictional character and an unintentional abstract product produced during her fiction writing activities. If fictional realist Doyle had the intention to write fiction and goes on to do so, then Holmes is a fictional character and an abstract artifact created during his fiction writing activities. In both cases, the first intention—the intention to write fiction—is required for the generation of the fictional objects, and the presence or absence of the second intention—the intention to create a character—merely determines what kind of object is generated and which variety of generation takes place.

We can now replace abstract creationism with *abstract generationism*: the view that fictional characters, such as Sherlock Holmes and Harry Potter, are abstract objects that authors generate. Intentional generation results in the creation of abstract artifacts; unintentional generation results in the

production of abstract products. Upon accepting abstract generationism, however, we face a new question, analogous to Brock's initial question:

WHEN\*: When (i.e., under what circumstances) do authors generate fictional characters?

With creation distinguished from production, and helping ourselves to Friedell's other responses to Brock's criticisms, ICP is revealed to be an adequate answer to WHEN after all. It does not offer much help, however, when it comes to answering WHEN\*.

While I do not have the space to adequately speculate about the best answer to WHEN\*, I do propose a tentative answer—one which allows us to make some progress on Friedell's call for further research on the relation between intentions and fictional characters. First, we say that an author *generates* a fictional character when she either *creates* that character or *produces* that character. ICP, which has now (thanks in large part to Friedell) been adequately defended as an answer to WHEN, gives us the conditions under which an author *creates* a character. A related principle, which we can call the *hypothetical intended creation by pretense view*, gives us the conditions under which an author *produces* a character:

HICP: A fictional character is produced whenever an author (1) intends to write fiction, and (2) as a causal consequence of that intention, takes actions that would have resulted in the creation of a fictional character were that author to have had the intention to create a fictional character while taking those actions.<sup>8</sup>

Suppose the particular actions that nominalist Rowling took while writing the first Harry Potter novel were such that, if she had not been a nominalist and had instead intended to create Harry Potter, she would have. Her failure to create Harry Potter as an abstract artifact, then, was due solely to her lacking the relevant intention. So, by HICP, she instead *produces* Harry Potter as an abstract product. Putting the point another way: nominalist Rowling, in the actual world, produces Harry Potter as an abstract product just in case Rowling (or her counterpart), in the nearest possible world in which she (or her counterpart) (1) engages in relevantly similar writing activities and (2) intends to create Harry Potter an abstract artifact, succeeds in creating Harry Potter as an abstract artifact.<sup>9</sup>

On this tentative proposal, then, the answer to WHEN\* is the conjunction of ИСР and ИСР. This illuminates some relations between the generation of fictional characters and authorial intentions: authors *generate* fictional characters *only when* they intend to write fiction; they *create* fictional characters *only when* they intend to do so; and they *produce* fictional characters *only when*, holding all else fixed, they *would have created some characters had they intended to do so*.<sup>10</sup>

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- I side with Friedell. I follow Brock (2010) and Friedell (2016) in taking the *nominalist about fictional characters* to be someone who makes the claim that (1) fictional characters are not abstract entities, as well as the stronger claim that (2) there are no entities that are fictional characters. An anonymous referee points out that this position is perhaps better thought of as *nihilism about fictional characters*. I agree, though I will continue to use 'nominalism' for purposes of continuity with Brock and Friedell. Furthermore, I follow Brock and Friedell in taking the nominalist's lack of intention to create fictional characters to be a result of their nominalism.
2. The *mereological nihilist* rejects an ontology including mereological fusions in favor of an ontology populated only by mereological simples (objects lacking proper parts).
3. For a similar reaction, see Zvolenszky (2015a, b). Though Zvolenszky and I reach similar conclusions, she ultimately—after careful consideration and discussion of the phenomena—retains a notion of the unintentional *creation of artifacts*, which, as will become clear, I am willing to give up.
4. One reason to prefer the latter over the former is that it would save the artifactuality of the novella in the novel/novella case, discussed previously. I intended to make a novel, and hence an artifact, so given my broad intention to make an artifact, the entity that I make—the novella—still counts as an artifact. Thanks to the editors for prompting further discussion here.
5. For extended discussion of these and related issues, see Mag Uidhir (2013).
6. Caplan and Matheson (2004, 124) gesture at a distinction between something being *caused to exist* and something being *brought into existence* and raise the question of whether creation requires *causing*, rather than mere *bringing*. I remain agnostic on this issue here.
7. On how the creation of fictional characters relates to the supposed creation of *mythical objects*, see Salmon (2002), Caplan (2004), Braun (2005), and Kripke (2013), who argue for a similar treatment of the two, as well as Goodman (2014), who argues for a different treatment of the two.
8. Though I invoke hypothetical intentions, ИСР should be distinguished from *hypothetical intentionalism* (cf. Tolhurst 1979, Levinson 2010), which pertains more to the topic of literary interpretation. For relevant discussion of how this comes apart from questions about the metaphysics of fictional characters, see Friedell (2016) and Thomasson (1999, 160–161, n.15).
9. The "whenever" in ИСР should not be read as "whenever *and because*." ИСР does not explain *why* or *how* authors generate fictional characters, but instead merely offers an adequate answer to WHEN\*.
10. For helpful feedback, thanks to Ben Caplan, David Friedell, an anonymous referee for this journal, and the editors of this journal.

#### Abstract and Concrete Products: A Response to Cray

Wesley Cray (2017) has written an illuminating response to my defense of abstract

1. Brock (2010) takes himself to have *other* reasons, as well. Friedell (2016) addresses and rejects these reasons.