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On the Problem of Identity for Fictional Characters

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Abstract

The problem of fictional character identity -determining when characters across different works should be considered identical- has generated two dominant approaches. Neo-Meinongian theories ground identity in properties attributed to characters within fiction, whereas Creationist theories focus on the conditions of authorial creation. Yet property-based theories produce artificial distinctions between nearly identical characters, while creation-based theories offer vague criteria in practice and restrict the creative process exclusively to authors. This article proposes a two-stage model of fictional character creation that extends creationist accounts by including the reader's constitutive role. In the first stage, the author establishes the character's initial narrative configuration. However, this stage is not a closed, static, or merely individual origin: authorial identity and creative agency are socially, historically, and culturally mediated. Reader interpretation and reconstruction therefore constitute a second constitutive stage that continues, transforms, and re-situates this initial construction across different contexts of reception. Each reader recreates fictional characters through a perspective shaped by cultural background, personal experience, and temporal context. This expanded creationist account argues that fictional character identity cannot be reduced to fixed criteria, since it depends on both authorial creation and the dynamic, interpretive engagement of readers across time and cultures. The article concludes that an adequate theory of fictional character identity must account for the historically mediated interaction between authorial construction and reader reception, and that such identity is better understood in terms of this constitutive continuity than as a fixed, universally applicable set of identity conditions.

Keywords: Fictional characters; identity; creationism/artifactualism; Neo-Meinongianism; reader reception; fiction.

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1. Introduction

Fictional entities, one of the prominent topics in contemporary analytic philosophy in recent years, figure in a wide range of fields, including ontology, metaphysics, aesthetics, and the philosophy of mind. At the level of aesthetics, the distinction between fiction and reality is examined, while the philosophy of mind and cognitive science focus on the mental mechanisms involved in producing and appreciating fiction. Ontological and metaphysical debates, by contrast, concern philosophical problems such as the reality, identity, individuation, and nature of these entities (Salis, 2013, p. 1). Ontological problems concern the reality of fictional entities such as Holmes and the Hobbit, whereas metaphysical problems concern their identity and individuation. The present study focuses specifically on approaches to the *identity of fictional characters*.

The identity of fictional characters is connected with metaphysical questions concerning what kinds of entities fictional beings are. More specifically, the problem concerns the grounds on which a fictional character can count as the same character within a single unified story, across a series of narratives, or in rewritten versions of a story. The two most widely endorsed approaches in terms of the solutions they offer to this problem are the artifactualist/creationist[1] and neo-Meinongian views, both of which adopt a realist position regarding the ontology of fictional characters. Although both approaches are ontologically realist about the existence of fictional characters, they provide different accounts of fictional-character identity as a metaphysical problem. According to the creationist approach, fictional characters are abstract artifacts created by the author of the relevant story, and their identities are determined in terms of the conditions of their creation. By contrast, the neo-Meinongian view distinguishes between existence and fictional being, and defines the identity of characters in terms of the sets of properties they possess and the ontological levels of those properties.

The central problem addressed in this article is that, although creationist and neo-Meinongian approaches offer powerful accounts of the identity of fictional characters, both contain certain conceptual ambiguities and structural shortcomings when it comes to resolving problems of identity that arise both within individual stories and across sequels. The *indeterminacy of neo-Meinongian accounts* concerns the limits of their conception of property sets, whereas the *shortcoming of creationist accounts* lies in their tendency to restrict the process of creation to the author's closed and individual activity. Yet the author's creative act is itself shaped by social, historical, and cultural interactions. It should be emphasized in particular that both the property-set criteria of neo-Meinongianism and the author-centered conditions of creationist theories converge on a common inadequacy in explaining intertextual identity. Transformations in a character's representation across sequels or different contexts render the rigid identity formulae offered by existing theories ineffective.

Taking this shared weakness as its point of departure, this article proposes an *extended creationist model* that preserves the fundamental claim that fictional objects are human-made *artifacts* while expanding the process of creation through reader participation. From this perspective, we argue that the identity of a fictional character should be understood as a historically layered, continuously reshaped, and open-ended *process of construction* influenced by readers. Accordingly, a fictional character cannot be fixed by means of a static criterion; identity must instead be located in the dynamic continuity between narrative and reception. This approach therefore seeks to move beyond the static structure of existing theories by establishing that, given the dynamic nature of reader-centered variables, it is ontologically impossible to formulate a fixed and universally valid criterion of identity.

2. Fundamental Problems in the Philosophy of Fiction

According to Amie Thomasson, philosophical problems concerning fictional entities[2] are of two kinds: ontological and metaphysical. The former focuses on the question Do these entities exist?, whereas the latter concerns the nature they would have if they existed (Salis, 2013, p. 1). According to Salis (2013, p. 2), whereas the metaphysical question concerns the nature of fictional entities, the ontological question is primarily concerned with the considerations that can be advanced for or against positing fictional entities in our ontology. In our view, the question of whether any entity exists is inevitably intertwined with questions of identity.

Kit Fine, by contrast, divides the issue in terms of the

[1] *Artifactualist* and *Creationist* approaches share the common claim that fictional characters come into being through the creative activity of their authors. In order to emphasize this constitutive act in a way that encompasses both approaches, the term *Creationist* will be used throughout this study.

[2] According to Aristotle, what connects works of fiction with philosophy is that both are concerned with universals. In the *Poetics*, he illustrates this connection by comparing poetry, as a form of fictional discourse, with historical writing in terms of the extent to which each is philosophical. On his view, what the poet speaks of is more philosophical. See: (Aristotle, 1984).

problems of *being* and *identity*: the first is the problem of accounting for the objects that there can be, whereas the second is the problem of accounting for the identity of those objects; one tells us *what there is*, the other *what it is* (Fine, 1982, p. 102). It is worth noting that Thomasson's treatment of identity under the heading of metaphysics accords with Fine's approach. Indeed, according to Fine (1982, p. 102), the problem of identity is not an epistemological attempt to determine how we can identify an object; rather, it is a metaphysical determination of what, in the *real* world, grounds the identity of that object.[3] In this context, according to Fine, the problem of being presupposes a defining set of properties, whereas the problem of identity requires that such a set be found. Accordingly, the identity of sets is explained in terms of their members, while the identity of fictional objects is explained in terms of the properties they possess in the stories in which they are introduced (Fine, 1982, pp. 102-103).[4] In this study, following Fine's methodology, the problem of the identity of fictional characters is likewise treated not primarily as an ontological dispute about existence, but as a metaphysical inquiry that gives priority to the nature and constitutive conditions of such entities.

The identity conditions of fictional entities are considered in two respects. The first concerns providing identity conditions for a fictional entity within a single literary work; the second concerns providing identity conditions across different literary works (Thomasson, 1999, p. 63). Fine conceives of this as a two-stage process of discrimination through which an object can be individuated or defined, distinguishing between *intra-contextual* and *inter-contextual* individuation. According to him, given an object native to a fixed context, that object can be distinguished from other objects native to the same context by solving the intra-contextual problem, and from objects native to other contexts by solving the inter-contextual problem (Fine, 1982, pp. 103-104). However, debates over how such conditions or criteria are to be determined, and what they should consist in, depend largely on what is meant by *fictional entities*.

Fictional characters/objects, or entities commonly referred to as *ficta*, constitute a broad ontological category encompassing not only persons or living beings such as animals and monsters, but also fictional places such as Rivendell and inanimate objects (Kroon & Voltolini, 2023). From this perspective, a fundamental feature of works of fiction is that they contain fictional entities—that is, characters, places, objects, and events with no real or actual counterparts (Poole, 2018, p. 11). The distinguishing feature of fictional characters is that they are first introduced in a work of fiction and lack spatiotemporal reality (Kroon & Voltolini, 2023). Fine draws a further important distinction at this point. According to him, while all objects occurring in a story are *characters* (tables, houses, and so on), only those native to the story (Holmes, Faust, and so on) are *fictional*. Thus, all fictional objects count as characters insofar as they occur in stories, but the converse does not hold (Fine, 1982, p. 106). In this study, the expression *fictional entities* will refer to characters that come into being directly through a story.

This article addresses the problem of the identity of fictional characters through a progressive line of inquiry. It first critically evaluates the identity criteria proposed by the neo-Meinongian and creationist approaches in the existing literature. It then examines the shortcomings of these property-based and author-centered theories, particularly with respect to their ability to account for intertextual continuity and reader reception. In light of these criticisms, the article proposes its central thesis: a *two-stage* model that extends the process of creation from the author's historically mediated initial constitutive act to the reader's constructive process of reception. The conclusion argues that character identity is not a static given but a process continually reproduced through the dynamic interaction between reader and text, and on this basis establishes the impossibility of formulating a general and universally valid criterion of identity.

3. Character Identity as a Metaphysical Problem

3.1. The Neo-Meinongian Conception of Identity

Among neo-Meinongian theorists, it is common to hold that the identity conditions of fictional objects are tied to the properties they exemplify according to what the relevant stories say of them (Kroon & Oppenheimer, 2024, p. 457). In this context, two distinctions are particularly important: Parsons's distinction between *nuclear* and *extranuclear* properties, and Zalta's distinction between *encoding* and *exemplification*. Parsons maintains that only the *nuclear* properties attributed to a character in the story -such as being human or being a detective- are genuinely possessed

[3] According to Fine, the fact that we may have access to epistemological conditions for identifying an object does not alter the metaphysical nature of the problem, since metaphysics cannot be reduced to epistemology. See: (Fine, 1982, p. 102). This methodological distinction parallels Quine's distinction between the question of *being* (*ontology*) and disputes about *language*: the fact that an ontological question is discussed at the linguistic level does not entail that the question is, in its essence, linguistic. See: (Quine, 1953, pp. 16-17).

[4] In light of these considerations, Fine's account can be seen as anticipating a property-based strategy that also figures prominently in later neo-Meinongian approaches to fictional-character identity.

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by the relevant objects, whereas *extranuclear* properties, such as existence or possibility, are not necessarily ascribed to the fictional character. Zalta, by contrast, holds that fictional entities *encode* the properties they are said to have in stories, but do not *exemplify* them (Thomasson, 2009, pp. 7-8).[5] According to these distinctions, fictional objects are taken to have the same kinds of properties as ordinary objects, while differing in the way they possess them. More precisely, Zalta maintains that fictional entities *encode* such properties, whereas ordinary objects *exemplify* them (Salis, 2013, p. 7). The notion of encoding can be understood as *exemplification-in-a-story* (Kroon & Oppenheimer, 2024, p. 462). It is precisely for this reason that, on Zalta's view, the distinction makes it possible to conceive of characters with inconsistent properties without thereby generating a logical problem (Salis, 2013, p. 9).

Another perspective in the debate over identity concerns the distinction between first-order and second-order properties. According to this distinction, relations among fictional predicates can be characterized in terms of second-order predicates found in the story. For example, *being a Hobbit* can be characterized as a property of a humanoid race, exemplified by creatures with hairy feet and small stature, who go barefoot and live in underground dwellings. Yet we cannot identify *being a Hobbit* with the property that exemplifies these second-order properties. Rather, *being a Hobbit* is something constructed from such second-order properties; and since second-order properties are properties of properties rather than properties of individuals, we should regard *being a Hobbit* not as something individual-like, but as something property-like (Kroon & Oppenheimer, 2024, p. 458). Accordingly, fictional individuals are constructed from the first-order properties that the story represents them as exemplifying, whereas fictional properties such as *being a hobbit* are constructed from second-order, or higher-order, properties that the story represents those properties as exemplifying (Kroon & Oppenheimer, 2024, p. 461). For this distinction, "*if x and y are abstract individuals, then x = y if and only if x and y encode all and only the same first-order properties*" (Kroon & Oppenheimer, 2024, p. 461). The limitation of this account, as with many other approaches, is that these identity conditions are insufficient to explain intertextual continuity—that is, the persistence of the same character across different works (Kroon & Oppenheimer, 2024, p. 461).

When we consider the solutions proposed to the problem of identity, neo-Meinongian theorists offer static *identity conditions* for fictional characters that parallel those found in set theory. Thus, according to Parsons, fictional objects x and y are identical if and only if x and y share exactly the same nuclear properties, or -on Zalta's account- if and only if they encode the same properties (Thomasson, 1999, p. 56). This formula, however, confines a character to a single text and to the set of properties associated with a particular stage. Such a limitation once again emerges as a problem for any theory of the identity of fictional objects.

> Handling transtextual character identity presents huge problems for theories that identify characters solely on the basis of properties they are ascribed. For if merely a single property is changed (for example in a new edition of the novel, in which a single word is deleted), then according to these conditions we are dealing with two distinct characters. So according to such theories distinct characters often appear where we would normally think there is but one -in texts reprinted with typographical errors, in translations, and in sequels- giving us a great horde of Jay Gatsbys, many Anna Kareninas, a long series of distinct characters all called "Sherlock Holmes," and separate Pamelas belonging to Richardson's tale and Fielding's parody. These consequences violate our critical practices regarding character identity and hence are unappealing solutions to the challenge of offering identity conditions for fictional objects (Thomasson, 1999, p. 57).

As the passage indicates, assessing the identity criterion of a fictional character solely in terms of the properties ascribed to that character in the work in which it appears provides an incomplete account. Two main solutions have been proposed to address this problem. The first involves appealing to the *smaller character* shared by each work, so that claiming that each work is about the same character amounts to saying that they contain a part in common—a basic figure included in all the works and expanded by each of them. The second seeks a solution by appealing to the *larger character*, constituted by combining the properties ascribed across all the works; on this view, claiming that different works are about the same character means that they describe parts of the same whole (Thomasson, 1999, p. 57). Thomasson regards both attempts as unsuccessful. In her view, the first approach risks mistakenly identifying as the same many figures that are in fact distinct, whereas the second is inadequate for explaining character continuity, particularly in series that have not yet been completed (Thomasson, 1999, p. 57).

The first attempt to explain how one and the same character can appear in several different literary works was developed by Wolterstorff (Thomasson, 1999, p. 58).

[5] Thus, the golden mountain has nuclear properties such as being golden and being a mountain, while it also has the extranuclear property of having been thought of by Meinong. Rapaport (1978), moreover, distinguishes between properties that are constituents of objects and properties exemplified by objects. See: (Salis, 2013, pp. 6-7).

Wolterstorff explains the identity of characters across different works by postulating a *set of core properties* (Thomasson, 1999, p. 59). In our view, the central problem here is that it remains unclear both which properties should be included in a set of *core properties* sufficient to distinguish a character and how those properties are to be determined in order for characters appearing in different works to count as identical. In this connection, Wolterstorff illustrates his view through the character of Faust, arguing that the various Faust figures shaped by different authors are in fact different extensions of a single *core Faust* character (Thomasson, 1999, p. 59).

Wolterstorff's solution fails to provide an adequate account of identity both within a single story and across different literary works (Thomasson, 1999, p. 60). The proposal reaches an impasse over the scope of the central core properties. If the criteria are made too restrictive, original reinterpretations -for example, a Faust who refuses the devil- are excluded; if they are made too permissive, any characters who are intelligent and human may be conflated with one another (Thomasson, 1999, p. 60). For this reason, in order to render this problematic proposal more workable, Thomasson suggests that, rather than specifying a fixed set of core properties, we might require that a substantial portion of a common pool of central properties be shared by both characters in order to call them *the same* (Thomasson, 1999, p. 60). It should be noted, however, that accepting Thomasson's proposal brings with it certain further commitments. According to Thomasson, this view first of all:

> This requires giving up the idea that there is one basic character appearing in each Faust work (because, on this view, characters are person-kinds that are identical only if they have exactly the same properties essential within them). But one might nonetheless say that there is a sense in which characters of different literary works are the same if they have this substantial overlap of properties, bearing rather a family resemblance to one another. But this still identifies characters that should not be identified, and separates characters that belong together. Characters can be very similar without being the same (Thomasson, 1999, p. 60).

The problems highlighted by Thomasson -namely, the possibility of different characters in different literary works sharing similar or even identical properties, or of the same character appearing across multiple works with different properties (Poole, 2018, p. 15)- correspond to the Quinean objection that there is a lack of clear identity criteria by which objects can be distinguished from one another, and hence a problem of individuation. As the passage above makes clear, in drawing attention to the difference between being *the same* and being *very similar*, Thomasson ultimately brings the discussion to a close without resolving the question of which properties should ground judgments of character identity across different literary works. In other words, Thomasson limits herself to noting cases in which characters may be very similar without being identical, as well as cases in which characters may count as identical merely because they share a *significant* overlap of properties. Yet the question of the point at which a character ceases to preserve its identity and becomes merely a *similar* figure remains unanswered.

It should be noted that, insofar as Meinongian metaphysics does not regard fictional characters as created entities, it lacks an adequate identity criterion capable of resolving the problem of their individuation (Poole, 2018, p. 14). On this view, because the identity of fictional characters is unaffected by the circumstances of their creation, fictional characters possessing the same properties are regarded as identical even when they have been independently created by different authors. Conversely, characters ordinarily taken to be the same across different stories will fail to count as identical, since they are likely to possess at least some different properties across those stories. Moreover, even a slight alteration made by an author to a draft may change the character being depicted and thereby lead to an unnecessary proliferation of fictional entities (Lee, 2025, p. 588). In this context, Quine's criticism, which can also be associated with the problem of the individuation of fictional entities, maintains that the Meinongian universe contains no adequate means of determining whether fictional entities are identical with or distinct from one another (Poole, 2018, p. 14; Quine, 1953, p. 4). Quine thus objects to Meinongianism on the grounds that it lacks identity criteria capable of distinguishing one individual possible object from another within the domain of possibilia (Poole, 2018, p. 15). Accordingly, Meinongian theories face two related problems: (i) they cannot distinguish different characters that possess the same properties, and (ii) they cannot explain how the same character can occur in different works, including works that differ with respect to only a single property (Poole, 2018, p. 15). The strategies proposed to overcome this problem -namely, (i) using the properties shared across all the works in which the character appears, or (ii) using all the properties ascribed to the character across those works (Poole, 2018, p. 15)- are themselves beset by difficulties. Taking shared properties as the basis of individuation restricts a character in a series to an excessively small body of information (Poole, 2018, p. 15), whereas combining all attributed properties may lead us to regard what we ordinarily take to be the same character in the hands of different authors -Faust, for example- as distinct entities (Poole, 2018, p. 16). Meinongian approaches therefore encounter a problem of individuation in accounting for the identity of fictional entities. Nor does distinguishing between essential and accidental properties

resolve the difficulty, since it is itself difficult to determine which properties are *indispensable* within fiction. More generally, whether a theory requires characters to share all of their properties, identical subsets of properties, the same core properties, or merely a sufficient number of identical properties, the question of which properties are to count inevitably re-emerges.

Because of this difficulty, Lee, who rejects the persistence of fictional entities across different stories and holds that it is difficult to provide a plausible criterion of cross-story identity (Lee, 2025, p. 589), responds to this ontological complexity by means of a legal analogy. According to him, the fact that different societies adopt the same law at different times does not alter the fact that it is *the same law*, even if its origins differ (Lee, 2025, p. 589). Accordingly, it is possible for a fictional character with the same properties to be created independently by different authors, and when we engage with either of these works, we are instructed to imagine the fictional character x in the same way (Lee, 2025, p. 589). This does not mean that they are different fictional characters.

Lee's claim that differences in authorship are not decisive gives rise to a more important question: what kind of relation holds between fictional characters that seem to reappear in different stories? (Lee, 2025, p. 589). In response, Lee appeals to Sellars's idea of conceptual change. The case is analogous to the transition from the Newtonian concept of *mass* to the Einsteinian concept of *mass*: the two are closely related *counterpart concepts*, so the earlier concept has not simply been replaced by a wholly different one (Lee, 2025, p. 589). Applied to fictional characters, this view implies that, although there is no *strict cross-work identity* between the original Holmes and Holmes as presented by a different author or in a different work, there is a *counterpart concept relation* between them (Lee, 2025, p. 590). Accordingly, when fictional characters in two different stories exhibit only slight differences, they may be said to stand in a strong counterpart concept relation; and by virtue of this strong relation, they may be regarded as *the same character in a loose sense*, especially when they appear in a series of works by the same author (Lee, 2025, p. 590). Lee thus relegates common authorship to a secondary role and develops a non-standard, flexible terminology of identity.

Lee's proposal of *flexible identity*, which relegates the author's central role to a secondary position, converges with the main thesis of this article insofar as it presents the fictional character not as a fully determinate representation fixed by the author, but as a dynamic structure capable of being reinterpreted across different contexts. However, although Lee undermines the author's ontological monopoly by constructing continuity through "counterpart concepts," he does not incorporate the reader's process of reception and reconstruction, which is the principal force driving such transformation. This aspect of Lee's account provides a useful basis for the *extended creationist model* defended in the following sections, which removes character identity from a static relation of authorial ownership and opens it to the reader's constitutive intervention.

3.2. The Creationist Conception of Identity

The creationist approach defines the identity of fictional characters not in terms of the properties they possess in the story, but in terms of the *conditions of their creation* (Poole, 2018, p. 20). For Thomasson, historical origins are decisive in determining character identity: according to her, we can claim that two different works concern the same character only when we can show that those characters derive from a *common origin*, such as the same author or source work (Thomasson, 1999, p. 6). This, in turn, presupposes the second author's *acquaintance* with the first work and an *intention* to *import* the character; otherwise, the relation between the two characters is treated as merely coincidental similarity (Poole, 2018, p. 17). Thomasson thus explains character identity not in terms of the properties shared across the relevant work or works, or in terms of the totality of those properties, but through conditions of creation such as who created the character, when it was created, and with what intention. In our view, however, an account that reduces character identity entirely to the author's subjective intention and to external conditions of creation opens up new problems concerning the fictional entity's independent representation and persistence in the minds of readers.

Since the relevant problems concern the process of creation in particular, it is first necessary to distinguish the process by which a character is created in a fictional work from other kinds of imaginative construction. A merely imagined or intentional object should not yet be identified with a fictional character. What distinguishes fictional creation from mere imagining is the object's incorporation into a work of fiction; accordingly, a merely imagined object becomes a fictional character only once it is incorporated into, or constituted through, such a work (Kroon & Voltolini, 2023). This distinction concerning the creation of fictional characters can also be expressed in terms of the difference between the fictional and the imaginary. Although every fictional object is initially imaginary, not every imaginary construction is fictional unless it is incorporated into a narrative framework (Brzozowski, 1995, p. 1). Yet even though the creationist thesis accepts this distinction, the question of precisely when and how the process of creation is completed remains a fundamental source of indeterminacy in both ontological and identity debates.

The creationist view's attempt to tie character identity to the creator and the work faces serious objections, particularly in the case of characters appearing in serial works (Thomasson, 1999, p. 61), anonymous works, and questions concerning the time of creation (Salis, 2013, p. 17). The central difficulty concerns what provides the causal connection between stories if one maintains that the identity of a fictional character such as Holmes emerges only once the final story in the series has been completed (Zalta, 2003, p. 245). In a series that is still in progress, or whose continuation by the author remains uncertain, the question of when the character's identity is attained generates a logical indeterminacy (Zalta, 2003, p. 246). A further problem arises because Holmes's identity would include not only the properties ascribed to him in the first installment, but also those attributed to him in later and more distant installments (Zalta, 2003, p. 247), making it impossible to know when access to the series as a whole will be available or when the series will be complete.

Zalta (2003, p. 250) responds to the objection that the process of storytelling -even in the case of a series- must be completed by likening it to an *extended baptism*, and takes the *according to the story* criterion to be decisive for character identity. According to Zalta (2003, p. 250), it seems preferable to suppose that reference does not occur until the baptism is complete: just as one cannot refer to an object by a name before that object has been successfully named, one cannot speak of the character's identity and referential significance before the storytelling process has been completed. At this point, the Parsonian claim that the identity of a character is logically dependent on the identity of the story in which it occurs comes to the fore (Zalta, 2003, pp. 250-251).

A further problem concerning the creationist account of fictional-character identity arises in cases such as Faust, where different authors ascribe exactly similar properties to a fictional character in their works (Thomasson, 1999, p. 57), raising the intertextual question of what kind of relation obtains between these later versions and the original Faust character despite their being written by different authors (Salis, 2013, p. 30). These problems become even more complex in intertextual comparisons, since there is no single *authorial authority* to which we can appeal (Grosso, 2022, p. 51). To explain such intertextual continuity, Grosso proposes a cognitive model and calls the transfer of a character from one work to another *migration* (Grosso, 2022, p. 51). This process requires an author intentionally to transfer a pre-existing character into a new story, while also giving rise to the difficulty of determining additional conditions such as similarity and legitimacy (Grosso, 2022, p. 52). According to Grosso (2022, p. 53), in this context migration gives rise to a *presumption of co-reference*: if we believe that a particular character appears in more than one work despite differences in the associated properties, then we are assuming that the relevant representations derived from the various stories concern the same individual.

Grosso models cross-work character identity cognitively through networks of indexed mental *files* maintained in our minds and the *networks* formed by those files (Grosso, 2022, p. 54). For example, the different versions of Ulysses found in different literary works correspond to separate files in our minds, each indexed to the relevant fiction; however, these files form a single network connected by vertical[6] links. In this way, Ulysses's continuity across works is explained in terms of a cognitive unity -a network structure- grounded in the intention to represent one and the same individual (Grosso, 2022, pp. 54-55). By tying fictional-character identity to the development of mental networks, Grosso (2022, p. 55) offers a flexible explanatory model for characters that closely resemble one another despite sharing neither an author, a work, nor even a name. Although this cognitive approach, according to which the network in the mind becomes more determinate as information increases, provides a powerful alternative to Meinongian and creationist theses, it also raises fundamental ontological questions. The most basic objection to this model concerns the problem of *intersubjectivity*: are networks of mental files confined to the mind of the individual, or can they be shared on a public basis? (Grosso, 2022, p. 60). Another point of objection concerns authorial intention, on which the notion of *migration* depends: although an author's intention to import a character into a work is a necessary condition for identity, it is not always regarded as sufficient (Grosso, 2022, p. 60). Moreover, in cases where this intention is not explicitly stated in the text, Grosso's theory remains inadequate as a source of an objective criterion.

Reicher's solution to the problem of the identity of fictional characters across different literary works, by contrast, is based not on finding the smallest character common to the literary works, but on looking instead to the largest *total character* in the work made up of all the sequels (Thomasson, 1999, p. 61). On this view, since the figure in each work encodes a different set of properties, strict identity cannot be maintained; the Holmes of each film or book differs from the Holmes of the series as a whole

[6] According to Grosso's mental files theory, co-reference is established through linking between files; whereas regular files depend on actual reference, indexed files are not subject to this requirement because of their metarepresentational function, and vertical linking constitutes the primary form of connection between such files. See: (Grosso, 2022, p. 53).

(Thomasson, 1999, p. 61). Reicher's proposal can be developed by treating the entire series as a single literary work. On this interpretation, the Holmes of each individual work is a *logical part* of the Holmes of the series as a whole, so that the whole Holmes can reasonably be said to appear, in part, in each of the individual stories (Thomasson, 1999, p. 61). This holistic solution, however, raises the question of what criteria determine whether a work counts as "part of the same series" (Thomasson, 1999, p. 61). Similarity of properties risks mistakenly identifying distinct characters as the same. For example, sequels may concern a character who is very different across two works, while works that are not sequels may nevertheless concern very similar characters (Thomasson, 1999, p. 61). A further problem concerns how and when we can know whether an existing series has been completed. To overcome this difficulty, Thomasson introduces a *historical element*: the author of the second work must be *familiar with* the first work and must *intend* to write about the same characters (Thomasson, 1999, p. 62). These conditions, it should be noted, go beyond the view that identity conditions can be specified solely on the basis of the properties encoded by the characters (Thomasson, 1999, p. 62).

Thomasson's conditions of *intention* and *acquaintance* for identity, however, contain a certain indeterminacy: the *detectability* of intention and the *degree* of acquaintance remain philosophically underdetermined. According to Poole's criticism of these conditions (2018, p. 20), such criteria may lead us to regard two entities with radically different, even mutually contradictory, properties as identical merely because this is what the author intends.

Poole's objection can be reinforced by Chakravarty's (2026) broader criticism of Thomasson's thesis of *rigid historical dependence*. Drawing on the cases of *Twin Homer*, *Fission Fiction*, and *No Man's Sky*, Chakravarty (2026) argues that the identity of a fictional character cannot be necessarily tied to the creative act of a particular author. These counterexamples show, at the very least, that authorial origin alone cannot be regarded as a decisive condition for the individuation and identity of fictional characters.

Consequently, although the creationist account provides a stronger basis than neo-Meinongian approaches, it remains insufficient to resolve the problem of individuation and, therefore, identity. The principal reason for this insufficiency is that the theory not only overlooks the exceptional cases identified by Poole, but also fails to incorporate the most dynamic element in the character's mode of being into the equation: the *role of the reader*.

4. A Proposed Solution

4.1. An Extended Two-Stage Model of Character Creation

The neo-Meinongian and creationist approaches examined thus far remain limited and incomplete in their explanations of fictional-character identity. The fundamental mistake of neo-Meinongian theories is to reduce identity entirely to *property selection*. Whether all properties or only a particular subset are taken as the basis, the question of which properties are to count as *determinative* always leaves the theory vulnerable to arbitrariness and mistaken identifications (Thomasson, 1999, p. 62). In this respect, rather than treating fictional characters as ideal abstract entities distinguished solely by their properties, the creationist thesis may be more explanatory insofar as it treats them as *historical entities individuated, at least in part, by the circumstances of their creation*. Yet the creationist thesis also reaches an impasse of its own. To ground the identity of a figure such as Anna Karenina solely in the author's intention or acquaintance is insufficient, because authorial intention itself is formed within a social, historical, and cultural context. Literary works characteristically allow for a plurality of interpretive perspectives; the creationist approach, however, does not adequately accommodate this plurality insofar as it confines the process to the author's perspective alone. Moreover, its inability to provide a universal account of when the act of creation begins and at precisely what point it is completed leads the view into ontological indeterminacy. Since the central thesis distinguishing fictional creationism from other forms of fictional realism is the claim that fictional entities are created entities, it is legitimate to ask when and how this creation takes place and when the process of creation is completed (Salis, 2013, pp. 17-20). Yet no universal account of the creation process is available.

The inability to provide an absolute criterion of identity for fictional characters is not a deficiency peculiar to this kind of object; it is a general ontological problem that also applies to real persons and objects (Thomasson, 1999, p. 67). As the example of the *Ship of Theseus* illustrates, even for middle-sized physical objects there is no agreed-upon finite set of identity conditions; instead, what are typically offered are only several necessary conditions, such as spatiotemporal continuity or sameness of species, or an infinite sufficient condition, such as possessing all the same properties at the same times (Thomasson, 1999, p. 63). Accordingly, when formulating identity criteria for fictional characters, the fact that any particular decision may appear arbitrary, or that certain indeterminate cases arise, has less to do with whether the concept of identity can be applied to fictional characters than with the complexity of the process concerning the conditions under which such entities are created. In this respect, the fundamental mistake of the

creationist approach is to reduce this process exclusively to the author. In our view, however, the problems concerning the creation and identity of fictional characters can be explained within a meaningful framework only through a process that *also includes the reader*.

When considered *within the context of a single story*, the dynamic process of construction we propose defines the character, unlike neo-Meinongianism, not as an immutable set of properties but as a dynamically constituted entity that develops and acquires meaning in the reader's mind over the course of the text. Here, identity is secured not through a static matching of properties, but through the *narrative continuity* constructed by the reader throughout the text. Accordingly, changes in a character's properties within the story do not amount to a rupture of identity; rather, they correspond to an active process of synthesis through which the reader incorporates those changes into the character's historical development. *In the case of inter-story identity*, by contrast, the model does not, unlike classical creationist accounts, restrict identity solely to *authorial creation*. In the model we propose, cross-textual reidentification does not require exact qualitative matching, but instead depends on an *interpretive continuity* that develops Lee's notion of the *counterpart concept* through the experience of the reader. What makes characters appearing in different works *the same* is not so much authorial creation as the tendency of reader communities and cultural contexts to preserve and reproduce over time the central elements attributed to that character. At this stage, the character is *constructed through a continuous process of re-creation* shaped by the reader's historical situatedness, lived experience, beliefs, and cultural capital.

According to the approach we propose, the construction of a fictional character is a *two-stage process*. The division of labor between these two stages, however, is not separated by a sharp boundary; rather, it unfolds on an intersubjective ground in which the two stages mutually inform one another. The *first stage* is realized by the author of the work through a completed narrative. In the classical creationist approach, this stage is generally understood as finite, confined to the author, and completed once the work is published. Yet the *authorial identity* that constitutes this first stage, or moment, of fiction -and therefore of character creation- is itself not a self-contained, static, and closed structure, but a process of construction shaped by social, historical, and cultural interactions. Here, *authorial identity* refers not merely to the biographical author, but also to the author's historical and cultural situatedness, aesthetic preferences, and creative intention. In this sense, the character-schema produced by the author is already the outcome of a process of reception mediated by the author's own cultural capital.

The *second stage* begins when the work encounters the reader. This stage is not the passive inheritance of a static object, but a second constitutive moment in which the intersubjective process of construction initiated by the author is carried into a new phase in the reader's mind. Accordingly, this stage is neither finite nor fixed. The character is continuously *constructed through re-creation* in relation to the reader's historical moment, lived experience, and cultural capital. In our model, this transforms the boundary between the two stages from a mechanical separation into an organic continuity through which character identity is understood in terms of historical fluidity.

In the two-stage model we propose, the distinction between author and reader should not be understood as involving two independent moments of creation, one completed and the other subsequently added. The initial character-schema constructed by the author is itself formed within a particular linguistic tradition, cultural code, and historical context. The reader's reconstructive role, in turn, is not a secondary intervention that alters this initial structure from the outside, but a second constitutive moment that sustains the character's ontological determination through historical processes of reception. Character identity, therefore, can be reduced neither solely to authorial intention nor solely to reader interpretation; rather, it must be understood in terms of the historically mediated continuity between the two.

This processual nature of character identity can, in one respect, be supported by Niall Connolly's characterisation-centered approach. Connolly's notion of an *evolving characterisation* provides a useful analogue for the processual aspect of the present account (Connolly, 2023, pp. 349-357). On the present account, this processual conception can be extended to the reader's role in character construction. Reader reception fills, interprets, and reorganizes aspects of the narrative that remain underdetermined by the text, thereby contributing to the continuing determination of the character. In this respect, Connolly's emphasis on the continuity of characterisation provides a useful structural analogue, even though the present model assigns a stronger constitutive role to reader reception.

David Davies (2004) likewise adopts an ontological approach that supports the dynamic, non-static character of identity by arguing that a work of art should be understood not as a static object but as an *action* or *performance*; on his view, the artwork is a performance as a whole that includes the artist's creative process. When this perspective is extended to the philosophy of fiction, the identity of a character appears not as an artifact frozen once the author

has produced the text, but as a continuous *ontological performance* that begins with the author and continues through each reader's act of reception. Whereas Davies's focus remains largely confined to the artist's creative activity, the two-stage model proposed here distributes this performance between author and reader, thereby defining the character's existence as a collective and temporally extended process of construction.

Derek Matravers likewise endorses the idea that fictional characters have a dynamic structure that cannot be reduced to a fixed set of properties. Questioning the distinction between fiction and reality, Matravers (2014) argues that readers construct mental models in order to make sense of a narrative, and that these models are informed by their experiences of the external world; this supports the idea that a character becomes concretized through the reader's emotional and historical coordinates. Matravers's account remains primarily cognitive rather than ontological; the model proposed here departs from his framework by treating reception as a constitutive metaphysical stage in the continuing determination of fictional-character identity. In this way, the historical transformation of a character becomes not merely a difference in interpretation, but a constitutive part of character identity that is reconstructed with each reading. The model retains numerical identity in its standard logical sense while locating the problem of fictional-character identity in the conditions under which a character is reidentified as the same character across different texts and acts of reception.

What leads us to think of the *same* character, therefore, is not the possession of an immutable essence, but the interactive coherence between the reference points established by the author and the reader's historically situated reconstruction of them. The sameness of the character as presented and as received derives not from its remaining fixed at the point determined by the author, but from the continuity of interpretation within the constraints established by the work. This account can also be situated in relation to Stacie Friend's discussion of the ontological status of fictional characters. Friend (2007) emphasizes that realist theories postulate fictional characters as abstract objects partly because doing so helps to account for our literary practices and for thought and discourse about fiction. The present model extends this practice-oriented consideration by treating reception not merely as a way of gaining epistemic access to an already completed object, but as a constitutive dimension of the character's continuing determination. The authorial narrative supplies a common framework, while readers reinterpret that framework from historically and culturally situated perspectives. Character identity is therefore understood not as a *static body of information*, but as a *dynamic process of ontological construction* initiated through the work and *continued* through reception.

Accordingly, once the work has been completed as a coherent narrative, it passes beyond the author's control. After the work leaves the author, it is no longer subject to the author's absolute authority. This does not mean, however, that control simply passes to the reader. Rather, the reader repositions the construction initiated by the author. As Barthes puts it, if the author wishes to express himself, he must recognize that his words can be explained only through other words, and that this process continues indefinitely; for the reader is the site at which the multiplicity of a text's meanings is focused, and the birth of the reader can occur only at the cost of the death -of the creative authority- of the author (Barthes & Heath, 1977, pp. 146-148). In this respect, the work produced by the author merely provides material for the thought that the reader will form; it is not, however, the sole determinant of the representation and meaning that will arise in the reader. The richness of the abstract and imaginative world of meaning that fiction offers to the reader derives precisely from this feature. When Barthes's approach is adapted to models of identity in the philosophy of fiction, it shows that character identity cannot be reduced to a static list of properties. From this perspective, identity is not a frozen body of data encoded by the author in the text, but the totality of the meanings that the reader attributes to the character's actions and qualities in the process of reception.

Accordingly, the identity of a fictional character is continuously reproduced within the field of interaction between Tolstoy's historical, cultural, and narrative construction and the reader's historical, cultural, and emotional situatedness. In this context, the narrative presented by the author corresponds to a file or data set that functions as a common point of reference for every reader, whereas reader-based differences arise from interpretations that enrich the contents of that file.

Within the philosophy of fiction, it is also possible to identify several figures and approaches that take into account a synthesis of author and reader in discussions concerning the nature of fictional objects and *make-believe*. Kendall Walton, for example, treats works of fiction as *props* in games of *make-believe* and readers as participants in those games (Walton, 1990, pp. 37-39). From the perspective developed here, Walton's framework suggests that a character's significance within the fictional game depends partly on the imaginative activity of participants. The principal difference between the approach proposed here and Walton's account is that the present model treats the reader's participation not merely as participation in a game of *make-believe*, but as a constitutive metaphysical stage that

contributes to the continuing determination of fictional-character identity.

Gregory Currie (1990), who also incorporates the reader into the process of creation but approaches fiction in more cognitive and intention-based terms, conceives of character construction as a communicative model limited to the reader's grasp of the author's intention; in this respect, his view approaches Thomasson's account of the character as an artifact produced through the author's intentional act. The model proposed here, however, differs from Currie's by positioning the reader not as a passive recipient who merely deciphers authorial intention, but as an active *co-creator* who reconstructs the character's identity with each reading in light of a historically and subjectively situated context. Moreover, the *two-stage process* proposed here also demonstrates why it is impossible to establish a *single and immutable criterion of identity* for fictional characters. The character is not a completed object, but is instead subject to a process of construction that begins anew with each act of reception.

4.2. The Dynamic Identity of Fictional Characters

A critical aspect of this perspective is that one reader's or viewer's conception of a fictional character will often fail to coincide with that of another; this divergence arises because each reader or viewer approaches fictional characters from a distinctive perspective. Consequently, because of both *intra-subjective* variables specific to individual readers and *inter-subjective* differences between readers, it does not seem possible to speak of a single, unified process in the construction of a fictional character. For example, the identity of Madame Bovary cannot be fixed solely by the author's statements in the text (Neo-Meinongianism) or by the author's intentional act (Classical Creationism); for one reader, the character may be constructed as *a figure driven by the pursuit of adventure*, whereas for another she may be constructed as *a woman with simple desires that could easily be fulfilled*. Similarly, the same fictional character, such as Anna Karenina, may be read by one reader as *a tragic victim* and by another as *a courageous and powerful woman*. Accordingly, the identity of Anna Karenina acquires meaning not only through what her author, Tolstoy, constructs, but also through mediating factors such as the reader's historical, cultural, and emotional conditions, as well as their beliefs and values. This explains why identity cannot be tied to a *single, universally valid, fixed* criterion at either the intertextual or inter-reader level. Thus, because of both variables specific to individual readers and differences between readers, it does not seem possible to speak of a unique process of construction governing the creation of a fictional character.

One might ask why reader-generated interpretive diversity should count as part of ontological identity, since in the case of real persons, differing interpretations of an individual do not appear to undermine that individual's ontological identity. In response, it may be argued that a real person possesses an *observer-independent spatiotemporal continuity*, whereas fictional characters lack observer-independent spatiotemporal existence. A fictional character is therefore better understood as an incompletely described object. On the model proposed here, this incompleteness leaves room for a further constitutive role for the reader, who develops the character beyond what is explicitly determined by the text. For example, *narrative constants* such as Anna Karenina's extramarital affair or her suicide function as relatively stable narrative anchors that constrain how the character may be reconstructed, but they do not by themselves exhaust the reader's conception of the character as an *individual*. Accordingly, on the account defended here, what the reader does is not merely to *interpret the character*, but to participate in the character's continuing ontological determination. This determination is not exhausted by the authorial stage but remains open to further constitution through acts of reception. The reader's interpretive contribution is therefore not merely an epistemological operation directed toward acquiring knowledge of an already fully determinate object, but a metaphysical contribution to the object's continuing constitution. The converse is equally true: the reader stage is ontologically dependent on the author stage. The author's text therefore functions as both a necessary and a constraining prop for the reader's field of play.

The principal conclusion to be drawn is that the process of creation can be adequately explained only if the author's historically mediated initial act and the reader's variable process of reception are considered together; yet such an account also reveals the impossibility of establishing a single and fixed criterion of identity for fictional characters. Accordingly, drawing attention both to the historicity of fictional characters and to the role of the reader requires us to revise our conception of fictional identity so that it encompasses an ongoing process that resists reduction to a fixed set of identity conditions.

In this context, the claim that no single and fixed criterion of identity can be provided does not represent a philosophical impasse, but rather expresses the dynamic ontology of fictional objects. Although the Meinongian approach constructs the character's basic framework through *descriptive properties* such as age, gender, and plot-related features, it does not explain why a character can continue to be recognized as the same character across different historical periods and by different readers. The philosophical contribution of this study, in this respect, is the claim that identity should be sought not in a static list of

properties, but in the interaction between the *framework* constructed by the author through narrative and the *interpretive continuity* supplied by the reader -in other words, in the dialectical relation between change and continuity. Thus, proposing an *interactive process* in place of a fixed criterion offers a more comprehensive model capable of explaining both the artistic flexibility and the historical persistence of fictional characters.

5. Conclusion

Accordingly, this study defends an extended version of the creationist view. On this account, the creation and continuing determination of fictional-character identity involve a shared yet asymmetrical and multi-stage process that encompasses both the author's socially, historically, and culturally mediated initial constitutive act and the reader's activity of reception and reconstruction. The conclusion reached is twofold: (i) any attempt to determine the identity of fictional characters will remain incomplete not only because it excludes the reader, but also because it treats the authorial act as a self-contained and static point of origin; and (ii) once the reader is incorporated into the process and the authorial stage itself is understood as historically and culturally constructed, it becomes impossible to provide any universally fixed criterion of identity. Fictional-character identity should therefore be explained not through an immutable set of identity conditions, but through the constitutive continuity between the author's initial narrative structuring and the reader's historically situated processes of reception.

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