

Fiction and Intentionality

AMIE L. THOMASSON
Texas Tech University

A good phenomenological theory must be able to account equally well for our experiences of veridical perception and hallucination, for our thoughts about universities, colors, numbers, mythical figures and more. For all of these are characteristic mental acts, and a theory of intentionality should be a theory of conscious acts in general, not just of consciousness of a specific kind of thing or of a specific kind of consciousness. In so far as phenomenology purports to be a general study of intentional acts of consciousness, it must be able to account for acts with all kinds of objects (existent or non-existent, particular or universal, specific or vague) and with all kinds of thetic character (judgings, perceivings, imaginings...). Any limitation of these features puts the theory in danger of being an explanation of only some kinds of mental act, and of mis-characterizing the nature of intentionality in general.

One of the most important features of intentionality is that the object of an intentional act need not exist (as a spatio-temporal, physical particular). Traditional theories of intentionality distort and trivialize the issue of our intentional relations to non-existent objects by considering almost exclusively such marginal and unusual cases as seeing a centaur. Such cases are, of course, important for theories of intentionality, but since they are so unusual, and epistemically so private, we have very few intuitions about how these experiences ought to be analyzed, against which we could evaluate the success of the theory. The selection of such cases is, in my opinion, the reason intentionality theory has not yet dealt adequately with the problems involved in dealing with non-existent objects like fictional characters.

The case is very different with fictional objects, for they are objects of frequent and quite ordinary (as opposed to paranormal) daily conscious experiences. Our experience of fictional characters is no doubt one of the most important and common kinds of intentional relation to something outside the realm of ordinary physical existents: we discuss fictional characters with others, write theories about them, interpret them, pass moral and aesthetic judgments on them, admire and emulate them, even dedicate academic disciplines to their study. In short, only the oddest of people has hallucinatory experiences as complex and varied as our normal experiences of fictional objects.

Thus given that accounting for our intentional relations to non-existent objects is one of the most important tasks for a theory of intentionality, and given that fiction comprises perhaps the richest source of experiences of non-existent objects, analyzing our intentional relations to fictional objects should be one of the most important tests of a theory of intentionality. Moreover, these kinds of relations can function as a test of a theory of intentionality precisely because we have such a wealth of experiences of fictional objects of which we need to make sense.

As we shall see, the other features of intentionality, including its conception-dependence and context-sensitivity, are preserved in our intentional acts directed towards fictional objects as well as in those directed towards existent objects. This fact creates many difficulties for phenomenological theories that try to avoid postulating fictional objects. If phenomenological theory is to analyze our basic kinds of conscious experience, than any theory which is too much at odds with our basic experiences of (and talk about) fictional objects ought to be rejected just as much as any theory that is inconsistent with or unable to explain our perceptual experiences.

I. Pure Content Theories and Fiction

Probably the most popular and philosophically successful approach to intentionality is the content approach, which was first formulated in modern terms by Edmund Husserl.¹ According to content theories, ordinary intentional relations to objects of our veridical perceptions can be analyzed into three basic parts: the conscious act, the object, and the content. The conscious act is an act of the ego or I who is having the perception or thought. The object of the intentional relation, according to Husserl, is normally just an ordinary physical individual or state of affairs which is chanced upon by the intentional act. It is *not* some sort of special mental entity, like those postulated by the early Brentano. The content of an act is what picks out, or prescribes, the object of the intentional act; it is dependent upon the subject's conception of, and angle of perception of, the object, but it is normally not something of which the subject is consciously aware during the intentional experience. In particular, the content is not the object of the intentional act.

The content is, for the content theorist, not only the defining feature of intentionality, but also the key to explaining the distinctive features of intentionality.² And indeed the content theory can do very well at explaining the

¹ I use Husserl's theory as the case in point for content theory here, but I take it that the essential features in question are characteristic of all content theories if they are to count as genuine content theories at all. See, for example, John Searle's account in *Intentionality*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1983.

² For discussion of content versus object theories and of the distinctive features of intentionality, see David W. Smith and Ronald McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality*, D. Reidel Publishing Co., Dordrecht, Holland, 1982, *passim*.

distinctive features of intentionality—as long as it is permitted to do so one feature at a time. It can, for example, explain the feature that the object of the intentional act need not exist, by allowing that an intentional act can simply fail to have any object whatsoever. If, in reading *Middlemarch*, I picture Dorothea standing before me, my intentional act may have the content <the elder niece of Mr. Brooke>³ but no object. The fact that the intentional relation changes according to the subject's conception of the object can be explained by the fact that two or more contents can prescribe one and the same object, so there is no problem in saying that quite different acts with distinct contents may be directed towards the same entity. The content theorist can similarly explain how one and the same mental conception or thought can pick out two different objects, for in different circumstances two instantiations of the same ideal content can pick out different objects in the world—different pennies that appear identical in perception, or different liquids that are conceived of on earth and twin-earth alike under the content <water>.⁴

If anywhere, it is in explaining the directed, relation-like character of intentionality that content theories first seem to be inadequate. Intentionality certainly seems a classic example of a relation, namely that between consciousness and its objects. The characterization of intentionality as a relation enables us both to explain its directed character (as a non-symmetric relation between something which is pointing and that towards which it is pointing) and to explain how it is that the real world and consciousness interact in perceptual acts (as the two terms of a certain kind of relation, mediated by a mental content).

The content theory maintains a minimal ontology by allowing that some intentional acts, including those directed towards fictional entities, lack an object entirely. Thus, if it is a relation at all, intentionality must either be conceived of as having the structure of a two-term relation between act and object, although it sometimes lacks a second (object) term; or as having the structure of a three-term relation between act, content and object, although it sometimes lacks the third term.⁵ So the content theory is forced to either give up the idea that intentionality is a relation (as Ingvar Johansson does)⁶, or to

³ I use phrases in angle brackets to denote contents, so <the elder niece of Mr. Brooke> should be read as the content: the elder niece of Mr. Brooke.

⁴ See David W. Smith, "Thoughts", *Philosophical Papers* vol. XIX (1990), No. 3, p. 163–89.

⁵ It is in principle no different if we treat intentionality as having the basic structure of a two-term mediated relation (the terms being act and object, mediated by content) or of a three term relation (act, content, object). I shall speak in the former manner as that corresponds more closely to our speech practices: even while recognizing that content is involved in individuating the relation, the relation of perceiving, for example, is most naturally conceived as a two-term relation holding between act and object via content rather than as a three term relation involving all of these.

⁶ *Ontological Investigations*, Routledge, New York, 1989, p. 196–226.

postulate a strange, possibly incoherent kind of relation simply to account for intentionality. In either case, the account it can give of the directedness of intentionality is limited to its being a directedness through a content, which is sometimes a directedness towards nothing at all.⁷

II. The Problems Fiction poses for Pure Content Theories

As we have seen, the content theory can easily account for most of the major characteristics of intentionality, taken individually. Yet it is not enough for a theory to account for the singular occurrence of each feature of intentionality, for the features of intentionality can also occur together. In particular, intentional acts directed towards non-existent objects exhibit conception-dependence and context-sensitivity, just as our veridical perceptual acts do. It is in analyzing such features of our experience of fictional objects that the limitations of the content theory come to the surface.

(1) *Two contents, one "object"*

Two of the most important features of intentionality are 1) that the object of an intentional act may not exist, and 2) that the intentional relation is conception-dependent. A quick look at fictional characters should make it clear that there can be intentional acts where there is no existing object, but yet where that object is conceived under two or more different concepts. Consider the following intentional acts:⁸

- Case A: 1. My thought about the current President of the United States
 2. My thought about the father of Chelsea Clinton

and:

- Case B: 3. My thought about King Lear
 4. My thought about the father of Cordelia

The content theory can explain how in case A we have two intentional acts, two conceptions, and one object, by explaining that these two acts have different contents, <the current President of the United States> and <the father of Chelsea Clinton>, but these contents pick out one and the same object, namely Bill Clinton. Thus the content theory can explain how it is that I can have lots of different thoughts which all are about one and the same real person, conceived in different ways.

⁷ For relational versions of a content theory, see Smith/McIntyre *Husserl and Intentionality, op. cit.*, p. 10–11 and Reinhardt Grossmann *The Categorical Structure of the World*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1983.

⁸ My "thinking" here should be read as simply placing the objects before the mind, conceiving of them, rather than bearing some propositional attitude towards them.

In the second case we want just as much to be able to say that the two acts are about the same object. The trouble with the latter pair of acts is that these also exhibit the first feature of intentionality: the object of these acts does not exist. So, in accord with our earlier analysis, the content theory should just tell us that in case B we have two intentional acts with two different contents, but no object. So our ability to explain that these two thoughts are about the same thing, namely King Lear, is lost, for it seems that the content theory can only tell us that there is no object in either case.

Surely it would be a deep failing of any theory of intentionality if it could not explain what made acts (1) and (2) about the same object. Such objections are in fact often brought up against the early theory of Brentano and even at times against Meinong. But these intentional acts are structurally parallel to acts (3) and (4), and it is just as much a part of our experience that (3) and (4) are about the same object; we could not even begin to read and understand a novel if we could not so unify our intentional acts with different contents as being about the same character. It is just as much a failing for an intentional theory to be unable to account for (3) and (4) being about the same thing as it is for such a theory to be unable to account for (1) and (2) being about the same thing.

Those with a persistent prejudice in favor of the actual may object to my way of speaking above, and maintain that the problem of how to say that (3) and (4) are about the same *thing* cannot arise precisely because they are about *no thing* whatsoever. I have used the turn of phrase 'about the same thing' merely because it is how, colloquially, we would normally express the experience of two different thoughts about the same character, or about the same number or abstract object. So I do not mean by 'thing' here spatio-temporal individual object. I maintain, however, that regardless of the manner of speaking which is used, a problem persists for the content theorist, namely, how to unify (3) and (4).

The case can be made in a slightly different way if we consider another thought about a non-existent object, for example:

5. My thought about the famous playwright murdered by Humbert Humbert.

Not only does the content theory have no way of explaining that thoughts (3) and (4) are about the same thing; it seems to lack completely a way of saying that (3) and (4) have something in common that (5) does not have. It can tell us only that they all have different contents and all fail to have any object whatsoever. Even someone who adamantly wanted to resist all talk about fictional objects would need to find some way of explaining this unity which exists between (3) and (4) but not between (3) and (5). The content theory of intentionality, however, seems at first glance to give us no way of doing so.

(2) *One content, two or more "objects"*

The converse problem of intentionality, that one and the same mental conception can pick out two or more different objects, also applies to the case of fictional entities. The point can be made based on the fact that fictional entities are created at a certain time by the creative acts of an author. Suppose that Marty Mertz sat down one day in 1959 to write a play about a prince called 'Hamlet' who lived in Denmark. Let us suppose moreover that this was purely coincidental, that Marty knew nothing about the earlier Hamlet, and, in particular, was not alluding to Shakespeare's character. We could even press coincidence so far as to suppose that Marty wrote all of the same words, in the same order, as those which appear in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. If all of that were the case, then my single thought about Hamlet the Dane, with the single content <Hamlet the Dane>, could pick out either Marty's Hamlet or Shakespeare's Hamlet. The content theory cannot distinguish the intentional act with the content <Hamlet the Dane> directed at Shakespeare's Hamlet from <Hamlet the Dane> directed at Mertz's Hamlet. For since they both have the same content but no object, there is no way of differentiating them (except as different tokens of the same act type, or, in Husserl's terms, acts with different real contents but the same ideal content).

III. Possible Defenses of the Content Theory

(1) *Two contents, one "object"*

Since the content theory of intentionality can account so nicely for the distinctive features of intentionality, taken individually, it seems advisable to try to find a way of working out the above problems from within the content theory instead of switching immediately to an object theory (for, after all, object theories have proven historically to be far more problematic than content theories).⁹ One could keep in line with classical content theories by refusing to postulate anything as the object of experiences of fictional entities, and attempting nonetheless to explain why it is that the intentional acts (3) and (4) belong together in a way that (3) and (5) do not. One might reply that what unifies these acts is that they are all experienced by the judging subject or subjects *as if* they were of the same object: these acts include a phenomenological individuation of the object *for consciousness* although there is no external object and hence no metaphysical individuation of King Lear at all. In this case that would mean: thoughts (3) and (4) are unified in that they are presented as being about the same individual, namely King Lear, whereas thought (5) is presented as about a different individual, namely, Clare Quilty of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. This pushes the question back to: in virtue of

⁹ See note 2 above.

what are thoughts (3) and (4) presented as being about the same individual (while (5) is not)?

Smith offers an account of phenomenological individuation for consciousness according to which “an object is *individuated in* an act or attitude insofar as the act’s Sinn [content] either presupposes or explicitly includes (in some appropriate way) a sense of which individual a given thing is, a sense of its ‘identity’”.¹⁰ Normally, what is presupposed is a set of background beliefs about the principles of individuation for the kind of individual given, as well as beliefs that ascribe various identity-relevant properties to that individual. So what might make my thoughts about King Lear phenomenologically individuated would be first, my set of background beliefs about what principles of individuation are relevant for humans, as well as a set of beliefs about King Lear. We might formulate a principle for grouping King-Lear-type-thoughts as:

T is a King-Lear-thought if and only if the content of T is such that it seems to prescribe a man the same as the king with two ungrateful daughters, who abdicates the throne early, dies heart-broken over Cordelia’s body...

These could serve both to unify my King Lear thoughts and to separate them from my Quilty thoughts, for my background principles of individuation for humans might tell me that the man with the above properties cannot be the same as a twentieth-century American playwright who dies of gunshot wounds inflicted by a jealous pederast.

This will indeed take us some ways towards understanding the individuating consciousness of fictional characters, but will, I think, not be enough of itself. Unifying our thoughts about literary characters solely on the basis of their individuation in consciousness is both too narrow to unify all our same-character thoughts, and too broad to keep some thoughts directed at two different characters from being treated as picking out the same character. The latter problem is, I think, the more formidable, but I shall treat them in turn.

First, the above account of individuation in consciousness of fictional objects treats their individuation as parasitic upon the individuation in consciousness of real objects, for their phenomenological individuation relies, by hypothesis, on background beliefs about principles of individuation for real entities of the kind in question (so, for example, my phenomenological individuation of King Lear relied upon my background beliefs about individuation conditions for humans). But fictional characters can and do wildly violate our real-world principles of identity for entities of a given kind without thereby losing their identity. Our background beliefs about little girls might well tell

¹⁰ *Husserl and Intentionality, op. cit.*, p. 370–71.

us that no little girl is identical with a blueberry, yet in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* Violet Beauregard is, later in the story, a giant blueberry. Thus we need a way of explaining why it is that my initial thought <that obstinate child will get her due> is to be unified as a thought of the same Violet-type as my later thought <that abnormally sized piece of fruit was sent to the juicing room>, even if I (or even all readers) perhaps omit to read the intermediate section of the book in which the transformation occurs, so that the element of sameness is not preserved in the contents of my respective acts and would seem to be excluded by my background beliefs.

Similarly, fictional works often postulate whole new species of entities regarding which we have no background beliefs about individuation upon which we can rely in individuating these entities for our consciousness. Represented objects can even change ontological type and be presented with contradictory properties. The unruliness of fictional characters, which allows them to violate normal real-world individuating principles without thereby losing their identity, is probably a major reason for the oft-maintained view that fictional entities cannot be individuated at all.¹¹ However real world principles of individuation may be drawn out, these can be changed in fictional works and very often are. The Russian Formalists argue that violation of our background assumptions is typical of literary works, which often invoke the reader's expectations only to violate them, to awaken the reader into perceiving the world anew. This awakening requires that a violence be committed on the reader's habitual means of understanding words, objects, and even larger social institutions. As Majakovskij declared, "The work of art should be as uncomfortable as a blackened boot or a truck in a sitting room."¹² That discomfort is by and large the result of the violation of the background assumptions we bring to our reading of literary works.

What this shows is not that fictional entities cannot be properly individuated for consciousness, but rather that either 1) their principles of individuation for consciousness will have to be formulated differently than the phenomenological individuation of real individuals¹³ or 2) the individuation of these objects cannot be identified with their individuation for consciousness. Given the unruliness of fictional characters, it seems highly unlikely that a mere admixture of beliefs about the individual and background beliefs about individuating principles for the kind in question can be sufficient even for in-

¹¹ See, for example, W. V. O. Quine "On What there Is" in *From a Logical Point of View*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953, p. 4.

¹² Cited in Peter Steiner, *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1984, p. 144.

¹³ It would seem that such a revised account of their individuation would have to go outside the contents of the conscious acts to include what is explicitly written in the relevant text (where, for example, the property of identity is attributed to Violet and the blueberry). This, however, is a first step towards giving up the purely internalist, content approach to the individuation of fictional objects.

dividuating these entities for consciousness, much less for properly grouping our various intentional acts that we need to explain as being about the same fictional object.

(2) *One content, two or more "objects"*

The converse problem is more critical, as it suggests that the individuation of fictional objects cannot be identified with their phenomenological individuation *regardless* of how we analyze their phenomenological individuation. Suppose we accept the above suggestion and claim that there are no fictional objects, but that we can adequately explain what unifies our various thoughts which are as if they were about a single fictional object by appeal to the purported individuation of such entities in the contents of the thoughts about them. We can, however, have two acts with qualitatively identical contents—attributing the very same attributes to the object, invoking the same background individuating principles and background beliefs about the properties of the object, and ascribing sameness to the objects in question—which are nonetheless about *different* fictional objects. In short, this solution provides no explanation of how it is that, even in our intentional relations to fictional entities, the same content (taken alone) may in different contexts prescribe two or more different objects.

For consider once again the twin Hamlet case, in which the character Hamlet created by Marty Mertz in 1959 is assigned all and only those properties assigned to the more famous Hamlet. As long as a strict internalist content theory is maintained, providing the solution to the question of how we unify thoughts about the same fictional objects solely in terms of relations amongst the contents of those acts, we will be forced to conclude that my thought upon reading about Mertz's Hamlet is to be "about the same character" as my qualitatively identical thought about Shakespeare's Hamlet. But this violates our well-founded intuitions that Hamlet and twin-Hamlet are different fictional characters.

As Saul Kripke convincingly argues for the case of real objects such as Queen Elizabeth, it is necessary that such objects have the origin that they have, and no other.¹⁴ This also holds good for the case of fictional objects precisely because they are created: it is necessary that Hamlet (if he exists at all) has the origin he has, namely in the conscious and creative acts of Shakespeare. This also holds good despite the fact that we could discover that Francis Bacon was the real author of *Hamlet*, and despite the fact that it would be an empirical discovery if we could prove that *Hamlet* really was without a doubt written by Shakespeare. But assuming that it was, it is necessary that Hamlet (the character) was created by Shakespeare and not by Francis Bacon

¹⁴ *Naming and Necessity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1972, p. 110–13.

or Marty Mertz. If another object called 'Hamlet' has a different origin, then even if it is conceived under the same content or set of contents, it cannot be identical with the first Hamlet.

What this seems to show is that, even in the case of fictional characters, the identity of the object is transcendent in relation to any finite set of contents about that object—that there is some real metaphysical identity of fictional characters apart from their individuation for consciousness.¹⁵ It also suggests that part of what this external identity of fictional characters relies upon is the circumstances of their own creation.

Before going so far as to postulate fictional objects, however, it would be well to attempt a different solution which does not postulate fictional objects and yet does take into account the context of intentional acts directed towards them. Perhaps a contextualist solution to how to group intentional acts apparently directed at the same fictional object can succeed where internalist solutions failed.

IV. The Problems Fiction poses for Pure Contextualist Theories

A different approach to the two-content, one-object problem which does not take recourse in postulating fictional objects might go outside the intentional relation entirely, and instead track the apparent identity of fictional characters by means of a principle such as:

T is a King-Lear-thought if and only if the thinker of T is situated in an appropriate context before a copy of *King Lear* (causally derived from Shakespeare's original).

] For example, that my two King Lear thoughts belong together while my Quilty thought does not belong with them, we might explain by referring to the fact that my King Lear thoughts occur in the same context—probably while seated before a single spatio-temporal object (a book) in which tokens of the appropriate words are written, which effect my eyes as I think these King Lear thoughts. My Quilty thought, however, probably occurs before different word-tokens instantiated in a different spatio-temporal object. If my copies of *Lolita* and *King Lear* happened to be reprinted in a single volume, this would be no objection, for each work has a distinct history as a separate whole; we need only to trace back the history of each part of the volume in my possession to different manuscripts in order to separate out the relevant historical contexts behind my King Lear thoughts and my Quilty thoughts.

¹⁵ Cf. *Husserl and Intentionality, op cit*, Chapter 8, where it is argued that the identity of a natural individual is transcendent in relation to any finite set of contents of acts directed towards it. I suggest we broaden this claim explicitly to include fictional objects as well.

Yet occurrence in this kind of contextual circumstance, before a book belonging to the appropriate historical chain of publication, may be necessary, but would not be *sufficient* to unify sets of thoughts as being of “the same character”, i. e. to classify these as thoughts of the same type, for example as King-Lear-thought-types. For we can certainly imagine cases in which (much as in the telephone game) one word is changed in the text each time it is published, so that ultimately, although the historical chain of publication is kept intact, we would not want to say on that basis that thoughts about the initial character and thoughts about a character in that book 20,000 printings later are the same thought-types.

Critiques of pure contextualist views of perception, which have argued that the same external contextual relation can be maintained (including affecting the subject’s eyes in certain ways) without a perception of the object occurring,¹⁶ should have even more force in the case of fiction. The historical and current contextual relations between copies of *King Lear* and my conscious acts might be left intact while we would not want to say that the relevant thoughts are King-Lear-type thoughts. I could, for example, let my thoughts wander even while still reading, or simply fail to unify the relevant words into projecting the represented object, the father of Cordelia, or I could be attending to the changes in meter of:

We’ll no more meet, no more see one another.
But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter—
Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine ... [II. 4. 221–24]

—in which case the same perception of words is maintained, but the thought is not a King-Lear-type thought but a thought about meter. Without recourse to content, and probably even to a prior notion of character identity, we cannot successfully group the thoughts about the same character together by means of historical or current context.

V. The Combined Content/Context Approach

A combined content/context approach to intentional acts apparently directed at fictional objects would seem to have a far greater chance than either pure internalist or externalist views at successfully grouping thoughts about fictional characters without postulating fictional objects. When we would count a thought as a King-Lear-type thought might then be formulated in the following principle:

¹⁶ Cf. David W. Smith, *The Circle of Acquaintance*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 1989, p. 151–52.

T is a King-Lear-thought if and only if the thinker of T is situated in an appropriate context before a copy of *King Lear* (causally derived from Shakespeare's original) and the content of T is such that it seems to prescribe a man the same as the king with two ungrateful daughters, who abdicates the throne early, dies heart-broken over Cordelia's body...

This will get us, I think, rather close to being able to classify the appropriate intentional acts as King-Lear-type acts. This closeness, though, I would suggest, is a result of the fact that the solution takes into account two of the most important elements in the structure of fictional characters: their origins and their attributed properties (such as being a king with two ungrateful daughters), rather than proof that this provides a sufficient analysis of our intentional relations to fictional objects.

For even the best combined account will still suffer from the problem of coincidence: there may still be cases in which I am appropriately contextually situated before a copy of *King Lear*, and in which I imagine a proud and foolish old king with three daughters, but where this is merely coincidental. Perhaps I have never read the play and am merely checking the text for the number of occurrences of the letter 'j'. Bored in this activity, I allow my mind to wander to my favorite royal fantasy. I am not thinking *about* King Lear although the content of my thought <the old king with two ungrateful daughters> is satisfied by King Lear and although I am situated in the appropriate context before a copy of *King Lear*. Such thoughts would be analogous to a case in which I hallucinate a plate of goulash while situated contextually before a real plate of goulash: context and content are in place, but nonetheless the act is not *about* the relevant object; it is only coincidental that both conditions are fulfilled at the same time. Theories that refuse to postulate objects for our intentional acts apparently directed towards fictional objects cannot explain the connection between thought and object necessary to make this a genuine King Lear thought instead of a random thought coincidentally occurring in the appropriate context.

We might insist that the thought with the appropriate content not only occur while the thinker is properly situated before the text, but itself be caused by reading a copy of *King Lear*. This does not resolve the problem, however, for there are many ways in which reading the relevant copy of the text could serve as the causal basis for thoughts which are nonetheless not about Lear. Reading of Lear's approaching madness could trigger thoughts of my old friend Lars, now sadly lost to madness, and his long mad ravings about a remarkably (though only coincidentally) Lear-like king. Although reading the text is the cause of the Lear-like thought, the thought is still not a thought about King Lear, and so we remain subject to the coincidence prob-

lem, as we are unable to screen out irrelevant thoughts caused by reading the book before us.

All manner of cognitive links could provide devious causal connections from reading the book to thoughts that happen to have an appropriate content. The combination theorist would not merely have to assert that it is in virtue of *some* causal link to the appropriate text that the thought with the right content occurred, but to attempt to distinguish “right” from “wrong” causal paths, counting only those thoughts caused by the “right” cognitive links as genuine Lear thoughts (instead of thoughts about the king of Lars’ ravings). Yet even if the various the causal paths from text to thought could be isolated, purely physical links of neurons do not come pre-labeled as “right” and “wrong” for genuine Lear-thought causation. Moreover, one could not distinguish “right” from “wrong” causal paths merely descriptively, calling the “right” path that which most readers’ brains followed, for it is certainly *possible*, however unlikely, that—thanks to some widespread quirk of brain-wiring—the majority of readers would end up with non-Lear thoughts. Some normative judgement or interpretation is required to determine which causal paths are the right ones to cause genuine Lear-thoughts, and which are the wrong ones. There seems little hope of finding a basis for this judgement apart from a prior notion of what should count as a Lear-thought. But criteria for what should count as a Lear-thought are precisely what the combined theory was supposed to provide: if the criteria invoked are those of a combined theory, we become involved in a vicious circle. Yet if the criteria are those of a pure content or context theory, then (if the above arguments are correct) they will result in mistakes about which thoughts are classified as Lear-thoughts. Thus it seems that to avoid the coincidence problem we will have to go beyond the thought’s content and causal history in order to explain what makes a thought a Lear-type thought.

VI. The Intentional Object Theory of Intentionality

Attempts to avoid fictional objects have brought us into multifarious difficulties in trying to explain features of our intentional acts directed towards fictional objects. This should perhaps serve as sufficient motivation for developing a comprehensive theory of intentionality which can account for (a) the features of intentional acts directed at real objects, fictional objects and even hallucinations as well as (b) the features of these objects themselves. In exchange for additional ontological complexity we shall gain the explanatory power to make sense of our thoughts about fictional, imaginary and real entities and to explain the different ways in which consciousness is connected to its objects in each case.

Let the theory for which I shall argue be called the ‘Intentional Object Theory’ of intentionality. It is a theory which has its roots in the work of the

Polish philosophers Kasimir Twardowski and Roman Ingarden (who were contemporaries of Husserl and Meinong). In *On the Content and Object of Presentations*, first published in 1894, Twardowski argues forcefully that all intentional acts have both a content and an object, which in no case may be identified with each other: “we must discern, not just a twofold, but a threefold aspect of every presentation: the act, the content and the object.”¹⁷ Although there is an object of every mental presentation, this object need not exist: Twardowski allows that the object of an intentional act may be real, merely possible or even contradictory. While allowing objects of presentations to be of different ontological types, Twardowski does not offer a detailed explanation of the kinds of objects which may serve as the objects of presentations, nor of the relations between these objects and the conscious acts which intend them. He suggests, however, that they may be created by our own conscious acts:

Every presentation presents something, no matter whether it exists or not, no matter whether it appears as independent of us and forces itself upon our perception, or whether it is formed by us in our own imagination...¹⁸

It is in the work of Ingarden, Twardowski’s student, that we first find a detailed explanation of the different kinds of existential status which the objects of intentional acts may have. Ingarden distinguishes the mode of being of purely intentional objects, those which depend upon conscious acts for their existence and properties, from that of “also intentional” or “secondarily intentional” objects, which do not so depend upon conscious acts and are merely “chanced upon” by intentional acts.¹⁹ Ingarden’s distinctions of different kinds of dependence relations and investigations into the status of purely intentional objects provide the groundwork for the theory sketched below: a theory which preserves Twardowski’s central intuition that every intentional act has both content and object, while also providing a framework to explain variations in the relation between intentional acts and the different kinds of objects they may have.

¹⁷ *On the Content and Object of Presentations*, translated by R. Grossmann, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1977, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁹ *Time and Modes of Being* (parts of Ingarden’s *Der Streit um die Existenz der Welt*), translated by Helen Michejda, Charles C. Thomas Publisher, Springfield, Illinois, 1964, p. 47. Despite his distinction between purely intentional and also intentional objects, Ingarden complicates Twardowski’s theory by postulating an intentional object constructed by the intentional act even when the ultimate object of an intentional act (for example, of perception) is a real object. (See *Der Streit um die Existenz der Welt*, Max Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1965, Vol. II/1, §47, pp. 200–201.) I reject this feature of Ingarden’s theory of intentionality, seeing it as a needless complication which also threatens to interfere with the direct connection between act and object in perception.

The first premise of the Intentional Object Theory, like that of Twardowski's theory, is that in any intentional act whatsoever we must distinguish both a content, which is a moment (dependent part) of the act, and an object towards which the act is directed. So unlike pure content theories, the Intentional Object Theory maintains that there is always an object of the intentional act. In no case may the content and object of the presentation be identified with each other, for it is always possible for the same object to be picked out by two or more different contents. Moreover, it is at least in principle possible (for acts with some kinds of content) that the same content pick out two or more objects. These central features of intentionality are preserved as much in our conscious experiences of fictional objects and hallucinations as in our everyday perceptual experience. (A feature ignored in both Husserl's and Meinong's accounts.)

The basic structure of the intentional relation, according to the Intentional Object Theory, is a non-symmetric mediated relation between a conscious act and the object of which it is conscious. A relation R is non-symmetric if aRb entails neither that bRa holds nor that it does not hold. Clearly from the relation that Ann thinks about Bob we can neither conclude that Bob thinks about nor does not think about Ann (as a matter of empirical fact, however, most relations of intentionality will be asymmetric).

A mediated relation is one with two (or more) terms, A and B , between which the relation holds in virtue of a third entity C , such that if C changes so does the identity of the relation (and sometimes the kind of relation). Common examples of mediated relations are easy to find. The relation of brother-in-law is one such mediated relation, where, for example, Bob is a brother-in-law of Ann if there is a person Calvin who is Ann's husband and Bob's brother. In this case, if Ann did not have this husband, then the relation between Ann and Bob would not exist. Nonetheless, as in the case of intentionality, it is possible for Ann to remain in the brother-in-law relation, mediated by Calvin, but related to a different object (just as, in intentionality, one content may prescribe two different objects). For example, if Calvin has two brothers, Bob and Bill, then the same kind of relation holds between Ann and Bill as between Ann and Bob, with the same mediator (Calvin). It is also possible to replace the mediator but maintain the same kind of relation between the two terms of the original relation via a different mediator. This, for example, could happen if the wife of our example divorced Calvin and married brother-in-law Bob. In this case a brother-in-law relation would still exist between Ann and Bill, but via a different mediator. This case corresponds to the feature of intentionality that the same object can be intended through two or more contents.

Conceiving of intentionality as a mediated relation allows us to explain the facts that two contents may prescribe the same object, and that two ob-

jects may be prescribed by the same content. But we do so without having to abandon the idea that intentionality is essentially relational in character and without having to postulate some special new kind of relation that applies to intentionality alone. Moreover, if intentionality is a mediated relation, there is no need to postulate incomplete objects as the objects of our perceptual acts (as Meinong does) in order sufficiently to distinguish acts from each other.²⁰ The remainder of this paper is intended to demonstrate some of the applications of the Intentional Object Theory, especially those which help resolve the problems posed by fiction.

VII. Variations in Ontological Status of Relation and Object

The Intentional Object Theory of intentionality explains the phenomenon that the objects of our intentional acts “need not exist” in part by rewriting this claim. The objects of our intentional acts need be physical, spatio-temporal or ideal entities, and they need not exist apart from or outside of the intentional relation. This is because one term (the object term) may depend for its existence and essence on the other term (the intentional act). Since the relation can take this form, there is no requirement that the object of the intentional relation exist prior to or outside of that relation itself. Thus we would not say, as Meinong and Twardowski do, that the object of an intentional act needn’t exist, but only that it needn’t exist independently of the consciousness which intends it, and it needn’t be a spatio-temporal entity.

The object of an intentional act may be of several different existential-ontological types, and may even be created by the intentional act itself. The object of an intentional relation may derive its existence from that intentional act, or it may be simply accessed (picked out) by that act, or it may stand in some intermediary relation of dependence to the act in question. For example, typically the object of a hallucinatory perceptual act will be created by that act itself, whereas the object of a veridical perceptual act will be just picked out by that intentional act, not created by it.²¹

²⁰ The ontology required by the Intentional Object theory is less elaborate than that required by Meinongian theories on two accounts: we need not postulate some special sort of object as the object of all intentional acts, nor need we postulate a realm of non-existent objects corresponding to each combination of properties (but only those objects which are actually thought about in an intentional act).

²¹ As the Intentional Object Theory allows that, in some cases, the object of the intentional act is a normal spatio-temporal entity itself (and not some purely intentional entity), there is in principle no problem with simply appropriating the best available intentional theory of perception, probably a combined content/context approach. The theory and the distinction of different kinds of dependence will ultimately, however, have important consequences for our conception of the perceptual relation, especially for elucidating the relations between conscious acts and the properties of perceived objects.

The nature of the intentional relation varies depending on the kind of dependence relations (if any) which obtain between the object and the intentional act. Thus before going further, we should pause to offer some preliminary definitions of different kinds of dependence relation:

Derivation: An entity A is derived from another entity (or manifold of entities) B just in case B is required for bringing A into existence (but not necessarily thereafter, for maintaining A in existence). Call B the **origin** of A.

Contingency: An entity A is contingent upon a separate entity (or manifold of entities) B if and only if B is required for A's continued existence (maintenance). Call B an **anchor** of A.²²

Contingency may be:

Rigid: A is rigidly contingent on B if and only if A is contingent on the particular individual B for its maintenance, so that A cannot exist without this very B.

Generic: A is generically contingent on B if and only if A requires some entity of the same kind as B to maintain it in existence. No particular individual is required, so that B can, in principle, be replaced by something of its same kind without A ceasing to exist.²³

Unraveling these different kinds of dependence will be the key not only to understanding the workings of the intentional relation in each case, but also to understanding the ontological structure of the objects of intentional acts.

VIII. The Structure of Fictional Objects

One of the most important features of the Intentional Object Theory is that it provides objects for intentional acts (apparently) directed towards imaginary and fictional objects—objects which are normally thought not to exist, and which certainly are not normal spatio-temporal individuals. Solving the problem of the ontological status of these fictional objects and their involvement in intentional relations is of the utmost importance for the Intentional Object Theory, as it will enable us to explain the features of our intentional relations to fictional objects which occasionally objectless theories could not.

A purely intentional object, as defined by Ingarden, is one which depends upon consciousness for its existence and for its essence and properties, and also for its creation and its maintenance; purely intentional objects originate

²² The term "anchor" derives from the usage of Ontek Corporation's PACIS project, which uses it to describe varieties of dependence first elucidated by Roman Ingarden in volume I of *Der Streit um die Existenz der Welt*, op cit. The above definitions are my adaptations from and refinements of Ingarden's usage and were formulated for the Ontek project. See Chuck Dement, Peter Simons, David Smith *Manufacturing Metaphysics* (forthcoming).

²³ The kind required may be specified to greatly varying degrees: from a dependence as broad as on conscious acts in general, to one which requires an entity from an equivalence class consisting solely of entities exactly resemblant in all their properties.

from and are anchored in conscious acts.²⁴ The objects of imaginative, hallucinatory, and fictionally-directed intentional acts are purely intentional objects. The relations which hold between such entities and consciousness include dependence relations which bind the purely intentional object to the conscious act(s) which found it.

Fictional entities are a species of purely intentional object and are investigated by Ingarden in considerable detail; his results are the basis for the following picture.²⁵ Fictional objects have what Ingarden calls a “dual foundation” in mental acts and also in something non-mental. First, as in the case of imagined entities, we need to distinguish between the creation and maintenance of the object; let us consider King Lear once again.²⁶ A fictional object is derived from the conscious acts of the author or authors who created it; King Lear, the fictional character, has his origin in the creative conscious acts of Shakespeare.²⁷ But the creative mental acts of the creator or creators are not sufficient to produce a fictional entity. A fictional object also depends upon an external (real) object: in the case of literarily represented objects, this second foundation is the instantiation in writing or speaking of the words of the relevant story. Although Shakespeare may have imagined a king with ungrateful daughters much earlier, Lear did not become a properly *fictional* character until the words about him were spoken or put on paper.

For its maintenance, a fictional entity also requires a two-sided foundation. In order to continue existing, it must be anchored in some or other copy of the same narrative: for Lear to remain a present fictional character, some copy of *King Lear* (whether on paper, tape, or CD Rom) must exist.²⁸ Fictional objects are also anchored in the readers’ conscious acts which are directed towards them. Thus Lear is generically contingent on conscious acts: the identity and some of the properties of the supporting conscious acts are variable, but they must be limited to conscious acts with a specified range of background assumptions and capabilities (like knowledge of the relevant language), with a content suitable for prescribing him (a content <that lump of quartz> for example, would not be suitable), and with a causal connection to

²⁴ See *Der Streit um die Existenz der Welt*, op cit, chapter IX.

²⁵ See *The Literary Work of Art* translated by George G. Grabowicz; Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1973 *passim*.

²⁶ For simplicity we shall here consider Lear only qua fictional character appearing in a text read by generations of readers, and ignore the complications of the relations which various theatrical performances of Lear bear to one another, to viewers, and to the text.

²⁷ The creative process may, in certain cases, be very complex, encompassing many different acts of many different authors. A character’s origin need not be limited to the conscious acts of a single author, but may be widely scattered across a manifold of acts of many authors.

²⁸ In order for two token texts to be copies of the same narrative, all of their atomic meaning units must be type-identical and in the same order, and they must both ultimately be derived in a meaning-preserving way from a common original text (or alternatively: one may be the original text, the other a copy).

some copy of the relevant narrative. In short, Lear also depends on there being some readers of English, who have sufficient understanding of royalty, abdication, retainers, and so on to understand the narrative as they read it.

IX. The Intentional Relation of Fictionally-Seeing

To explicate the relations between act, content and object in the case of intentional acts directed towards fictional objects, let us consider a case in which, while reading *King Lear*, I picture the aged king to myself.²⁹ The Intentional Object Theory, combined with an Ingardian view of the structure of fictional objects, can explain the features of our intentional experiences of fictional objects (two contents, one object; one content, two objects; and the coincidence problem) which the objectless content, contextualist and mixed theories could not. It can explain, for example, why my thoughts about the father of Goneril and about the father of Cordelia are about the same thing by postulating the fictional entity King Lear, which both acts have as their object although they involve conceiving King Lear under different contents. We can justifiably say that each of my acts of fictionally-seeing is about *this* Lear himself (of the Shakespeare play) and not just any imagined or perceived aged king, because each act is appropriately causally connected to the real object which acts as Lear's physical anchor (i.e. to some copy of *King Lear*) and because each act also serves as a generic second anchor of the fictional object Lear.³⁰ Moreover, it must be remembered that this physical entity, to qualify as a copy of the narrative *King Lear* and hence to serve as Lear's anchor at all, must be causally (and contentually) derived from the original copy of the narrative which was created by Shakespeare along with Lear himself. Figure 1 details the most basic relations holding amongst the act, content, object, and physical anchor in the fictionally-seeing relation.

occasionally

It can also explain the fact that my thought about Hamlet and that about twin-Hamlet are about different things even if the contents are identical, for the narratives anchoring these Hamlets are different in virtue of being derived from a different origin (indeed from origins not even remotely connected with one another). The object of my act is the Hamlet of Shakespeare, and not some Hamlet of a similar story penned by Marty Mertz, because the copy of the text which is causally related to my act is also causally derived in an ap-

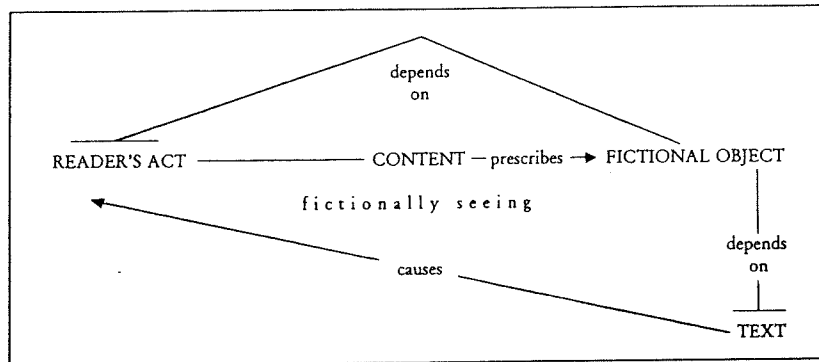
²⁹ There seems to be no good and sufficiently precise verb for what we do when we picture literary figures to ourselves during the reading process. I will call such intentional acts "fictionally-seeing", as the fictional counterpart of perceiving or hallucinating.

³⁰ This real textual anchor, however, does not enter into the intentional act in question either as a part of the content or as the object (or any part or moment thereof). This is, however, not to say that we cannot think of fictional entities unless we are presently reading the relevant book. Just as we can not only perceive, but also remember or imagine a real object, so we can not only fictionally-see, but also remember or imagine fictional objects. These acts, however, have a different structure from what I here call fictionally-seeing intentional acts.

appropriately preserved chain of publication derived from Shakespeare's original text.

Figure 1

The Relation of Fictionally-Seeing



This characterization of the fictionally-seeing relation can moreover answer the coincidence-challenge, which even the best solution that refrained from postulating fictional objects, the combined content-context approach, could not. Why is it that this act is about Lear? Because Lear is the object term of an intentional relation directed towards him by means of a content suitable for prescribing him. Why can we not simply say it is coincidence that the content of my act prescribes some Lear while I happen to be situated before a copy of *King Lear*? Because this copy of *King Lear* founds Lear in part, and my act founds him in part: Lear's dual foundation connects the causal relation to the intentional relation. Thus postulating consciousness-dependent fictional objects as the objects of some of our intentional acts can indeed answer the challenges posed above of explaining how it is that the various features of intentionality interact in the case of fiction.

The Intentional Object Theory involves postulating objects with a special, consciousness-dependent status as well as analyzing intentionality as a particular kind of relation. Together, by understanding both the ontological status of fictional objects (as entities dependent on consciousness and a text) and the structure of the intentional relation of fictionally-seeing (as causally connected to a text and prescribing a fictional object through a content) we can finally answer the challenge of explaining the relation between consciousness and its objects in the case of fiction.

X. Advantages of the Intentional Object Theory

Choosing a theory of intentionality, like choosing any theory, is a matter of weighing advantages and disadvantages concerning how well the theories can account for the data, what ontological or methodological complexity they re-

quire, what other phenomena they might be able to explain, and so on. The complex field of data provided by our intentional experiences of fictional entities has long been overlooked, despite the importance of fiction in daily human life, and although fiction should provide one of the most important test cases for a theory of intentionality. Content, contextualist and mixed theories which shun the additional ontological complexity of fictional objects all, as we have seen, run into various difficulties in explaining features of our experience of fictional objects, and there seems no immediately promising means of resolving these difficulties.

The Intentional Object Theory is proposed as a means of surmounting these difficulties through a uniform account of intentionality as a relation of act to object, mediated by a content. Its disadvantage vis-a-vis the other mentioned theories is fairly obvious: since the Intentional Object Theory maintains that every intentional act has an object as well as a content, it must postulate more objects and more kinds of object than its occasionally objectless counterparts. It distinguishes the different kinds of objects of intentional acts largely by means of the different dependence relations which may hold between these objects and the conscious acts directed towards them; the additional entities postulated are essentially consciousness-dependent.

The disadvantage of complexity in the object-ontology is partly balanced out by a consequent ontological advantage: the Intentional Object Theory conceives of intentionality as a proper relation. Content theories cannot do so precisely because they maintain that there are objectless acts, in which case there is only one term. This should at least initially be judged an advantage for the newer theory, for it gives us the ontological tools to account for the feature of intentionality cited above, that it is "relation-like" without having to postulate a strange one-term pseudo-relation unique to intentionality, so that intentionality, as a relation, can fit tidily into an ontological system without needing a special category of its own.

The greatest advantage of the Intentional Object Theory is, however, its explanatory power with regard to our experiences of fictional objects and the presence of the features of intentionality in these acts. Unlike objectless phenomenological theories, it can do justice to the multiplicity and importance of our intentional relations to fictional objects, and thereby also enable us to develop a comprehensive theory of intentionality. With greater ontological complexity in terms of objects we can buy the tools to better explain the relation between consciousness and its objects not only in the case of fiction, but also, I would argue, in the case of perception, hallucination and other kinds of intentional act. Considering the problems which content theories encounter in explaining the features of intentional relations with fictional entities, the expansion of our ontology to include consciousness-dependent enti-

ties may be a small price to pay for a theory of intentionality which can completely account for all kinds of intentional experience.³¹

³¹ I wish to thank David Smith, Peter Simons, Peter Lewis, Barry Smith, Charles Crittenden and two referees of this journal for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.