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Salmon on Hob and Nob

1. Introduction

Nathan Salmon (2005b) appeals to his theory of mythical objects as part of an attempt to solve Peter Geach's Hob-Nob puzzle. In this paper I argue that, even if Salmon's theory of mythical objects is correct, his attempt to solve the puzzle is unsuccessful. I also refute an original variant of his proposal. The discussion indicates that it is difficult (if not impossible) to devise a genuine solution to the Hob-Nob puzzle that relies on Salmon's theory of mythical objects.

2. The Puzzle

Geach's puzzle concerns the following sentence:

- (1) Hob thinks a witch has blighted Bob's mare, and Nob wonders whether she (the same witch) killed Cob's sow. (1967: 628)

(1) is ambiguous. On one reading, it entails that there exists a witch whom Hob and Nob are thinking about. This reading may be represented as follows:

- (2) $\exists x [(x \text{ is a witch}) \text{ and } (\text{Hob thinks that } x \text{ blighted Bob's mare, and Nob wonders whether } x \text{ killed Cob's sow})]$.

However, on the reading that concerns Geach, which I will call '(G)', (1) does not entail that a witch exists. Considering the following example, devised by Walter Edelberg (1986), should help to make (G) salient:

Example 1

The Gotham City newspapers have reported that a witch, referred to as "Samantha", has been on quite a rampage. According to the articles, she has been blighting farm animals and crops and throwing people down wells. In reality, there is no such person: the

animals and crops all died of natural causes, and the people found at the well-bottoms had all stumbled in by accident in a drunken stupor. The news reporters simply assumed that a witch was responsible for all the mishaps, and dubbed her “Samantha”. Hob and Nob both read the Gotham Star and, like most folks, they believe the stories about the witch. Hob thinks Samantha must have blighted Bob’s mare, which took ill yesterday. Nob [wonders if] Samantha killed his friend Cob’s sow. ([...] Nob has no beliefs at all about Hob or about Bob’s mare. He is unaware of the existence of either.) [= Example 2 in Edelberg 1986: 2]

(1) is intuitively true here, even though there is no witch whom Hob and Nob are thinking about.

Appropriately enough, the reading that (1) most naturally takes in this context is (G).

Crucially, Hob and Nob in Example 1 are thinking about the *same* witch in some loose sense; they are both thinking about “Samantha.” Such convergence is required for (1) on (G) to be true, given the anaphoric link between ‘a witch’ and ‘she’. Hob and Nob need not represent “the witch” in the same way (Hob could be thinking about “Samantha” and Nob about “Sammy the Terrible”), but they need to be thinking about the same witch in the relevant sense.

It is difficult to speak more precisely about the truth-conditions of (1) on (G). Indeed, Geach’s puzzle arises when trying to analyze (G). The problematic issue might be conceived as how to treat the pronoun ‘she’ in (1). (2), introduced above, treats ‘she’ as a variable that is bound by an existential quantifier. (2), however, incorrectly analyzes (G), since it entails that a witch exists. One might think that ‘she’ should instead be construed as a pronoun of laziness that avoids repetitious language by standing for a definite description.¹ On this line, (1) on (G) is a shorthand way of saying something like (3) or (4).

- (3) Hob thinks that there is a witch that blighted Bob’s mare, and Nob wonders whether the witch that blighted Bob’s mare killed Cob’s sow.
- (4) Hob thinks that there is a witch that blighted Bob’s mare, and Nob wonders whether the witch that Hob thinks blighted Bob’s mare killed Cob’s sow.

¹ Geach (1967: 630) first mentions this strategy.

(3) and (4) are themselves ambiguous. The second clause of each sentence may be interpreted as making a *de re* or *de dicto* attitude report.² The *de re* readings of (3) and (4) can be paraphrased as follows.

- (3a) Hob thinks that there is a witch that blighted Bob's mare, and the witch that blighted Bob's mare is such that Nob wonders whether it killed Cob's sow.
- (4a) Hob thinks that there is a witch that blighted Bob's mare, and the witch that Hob thinks blighted Bob's mare is such that Nob wonders whether it killed Cob's sow.

These sentences incorrectly analyze (1) on (G), since they entail that a witch exists. The *de dicto* readings of (3) and (4) can be (roughly) paraphrased as follows.

- (3b) Hob thinks that there is a witch that blighted Bob's mare, and Nob wonders, "Did the witch that blighted Bob's mare kill Cob's sow?"
- (4b) Hob thinks that there is a witch that blighted Bob's mare, and Nob wonders, "Did the witch that Hob thinks blighted Bob's mare kill Cob's sow?"

These sentences do not entail that a witch exists. However, (3b) entails that Nob is thinking about "Bob's mare", and (4b) entails that Nob is thinking about "Bob's mare" and "Hob". As Example 1 reveals, (1) on (G) may be true even if Nob has no thoughts about Hob or Bob's mare. Thus, (3b) and (4b) incorrectly analyze (1) on (G).

It seems that no matter how (3) and (4) are interpreted, neither of them captures (G). How, then, should (G) be analyzed? There is no easy answer, and this is Geach's puzzle in a nutshell.

² See Quine (1956) for a seminal discussion of the *de re/de dicto* distinction. (He uses the words 'relational' and 'notional' instead of 'de re' and 'de dicto'.) *De re* attitude reports, but not *de dicto* ones, characteristically permit substitution of co-denoting terms *salva veritate*. Very roughly, a true *de dicto* report is such that the subject would assent to the report. 'Jim thinks that the spy sitting next to him is not a spy' is most naturally read *de re*. 'Todd thinks that Hesperus is brighter than Phosphorous' is most naturally read *de dicto*.

3. Salmon's Theory of Mythical Objects

Salmon's response to this puzzle relies on his theory of mythical objects. He thinks that they are similar to fictional objects. Following Kripke (1973), he thinks that fictional objects, such as Sherlock Holmes and Captain Nemo's *Nautilus*, exist. Fictional objects on this view are not physical. They are abstract objects that are created by writers of fictional stories. Arthur Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes. Jules Verne created the *Nautilus*. Being abstract, Holmes is not a detective; he (or perhaps *it*) is a fictional detective. Likewise, the *Nautilus* is not a submarine; it is a fictional submarine. On this view, a fictional detective is no more a detective, and a fictional submarine is no more a submarine, than a toy duck is a duck.

Similarly, Salmon thinks that mythical objects, such as Nessie (a.k.a. 'The Loch Ness Monster') and The Fountain of Youth, exist. They are abstract objects that are inadvertently created by originators of myths, where a myth is taken to be "any mistaken theory that has been held true." (2005c: 82) Being abstract, Nessie is not a monster; it is a mythical monster. The Fountain of Youth is not a spring but a mythical spring. Mythical objects differ only slightly from fictional objects. For Salmon, "[t]he principal difference between mythical and fictional objects is that the myth is believed while the fiction is only make-believe." (2005b: 104)

In addition to this metaphysical picture of mythical objects, Salmon has a linguistic/doxastic picture. He thinks that any name that refers to a mythical object when skeptics use it to talk about a myth typically refers to the same mythical object when it is used by believers of the myth. If a skeptic says 'Nessie is a mythical monster' and a dupe says 'I can see Nessie swimming', the name 'Nessie' in both instances refers to the same mythical object. Moreover, a dupe who falsely believes that Nessie is swimming believes something about a

mythical object, even if they think that their belief is about a real monster. This explains why their belief is false; since Nessie is mythical, it is abstract and thus cannot swim.

4. Salmon's Response to Geach's Puzzle

Salmon's theory of mythical objects is interesting, controversial, and worthy of further discussion. But I shall neither defend nor criticize it here. For the rest of this paper I will instead suppose for the sake of argument that this theory is correct. This will allow me to show that, even if this theory is correct, Salmon's account fails to provide a correct analysis of (G).

Salmon's primary analysis of (G) runs as follows:

- (5) There is a mythical witch such that (i) Hob thinks: she has blighted Bob's mare and (ii) Nob wonders whether: she killed Cob's sow.³ [= (7) in 2005b: 106]

Example 1 supports this proposal. (1) on (G) is true in that case. So is (5); there *is* a mythical witch in Example 1, namely Samantha, such that (a) Hob thinks that she blighted Bob's mare, and (b) Nob wonders whether she killed Cob's sow.

So far, so good. (5) and (1) on (G) are both true in Example 1. However, there are counterexamples to the claim that (5) correctly analyzes (G)—i.e., cases in which (5) differs in truth-value from (1) on (G). Consider Example 2:

Example 2

There is a spinster named 'Abigail' who is not a witch. Hob and Nob know her on a first-name basis. Dob, Gotham's resident gossip, tells Hob and Nob separately that Abigail is a witch. Hob thinks, "It all makes sense now! Abigail is a witch who blighted

³ In a footnote, Salmon suggests a slight variant of (5) that results from replacing 'a mythical witch' with 'a mythical witch *or* a witch'. (2005b: 106n27) This variant takes the speaker of (1) to be "cautiously agnostic on the question of witchcraft." Regarding (6), an analysis I consider later, Salmon suggests an analogous variant. Everything I say about (5) and (6) applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to these variants.

Bob's mare all by herself." Nob thinks, "Aha, Abigail is a witch. Did she kill Cob's sow?" (Nob has no thoughts about Hob or Bob's mare.)

Here (1) on (G) is intuitively true, since Hob and Nob are both thinking about "Abigail." (5), however, is false. There does *not* exist a mythical witch such that (a) Hob thinks that she blighted Bob's mare, and (b) Nob wonders whether she killed Cob's sow. After all, Abigail is not a mythical witch but a woman.⁴ It follows that (5) being true is not *necessary* for (1) on (G) to be true.

Example 3 shows that it is also not *sufficient*:

Example 3

There is a mythical witch named 'Beth'. Most people in Gotham falsely believe that she is a real witch. Hob, having never heard of Beth before, overhears a rumor about her blighting Bob's mare. From the little he hears, Hob infers that Beth is a woman (not a witch) who blighted Bob's mare all by herself. Nob, also overhearing the rumor, wonders whether Beth killed Cob's sow.

Here (5) is true; there *is* a mythical witch, namely Beth, such that (a) Hob believes that she blighted Bob's mare, and (b) Nob wonders whether she killed Cob's sow. But (1) on (G) is intuitively false, since Hob does not think that Beth is a witch. It follows that (5) being true is not sufficient for (1) on (G) to be true. Since (5) being true is neither necessary nor sufficient for (1) on (G) to be true, (5) incorrectly analyses (G).

Salmon proposes a variant analysis that runs (with trivial syntactic differences) as follows:

- (6) [Hob thinks: there is a witch that blighted Bob's mare] and [Nob wonders whether: *dthat*[the mythical witch that Hob thinks blighted Bob's mare] killed Cob's sow. (2005b: 106n27)

⁴ Although Abigail is a witch according to Dob's myth (mistaken theory) about her, she is not a mythical witch. Mistaking someone for a witch does not a mythical witch make. Mythical witches, like all mythical objects, are abstract. Abigail is not abstract and thus cannot be a mythical witch, regardless of what others think about her.

The content of a *dthat*-term is the object denoted by the embedded definite description, in this case the denotation of ‘the mythical witch that Hob thinks blighted Bob’s mare’. Still, (6) fares no better than (5). In Example 2, (1) on (G) is true, but (6) is not true; its *dthat*-term has no content, since there is no mythical witch that Hob thinks blighted Bob’s mare. There is only Abigail, a human. It follows that (6) being true is not *necessary* for (1) on (G) to be true.

Example 4 shows that it is also not *sufficient*:

Example 4

There is a mythical witch named ‘Carol’ and a spinster named ‘Dagmar’. Hob thinks that Carol is a human (not a witch) who blighted Bob’s mare, and that Dagmar is a witch who also blighted Bob’s mare. Hob thinks that nobody else blighted Bob’s mare. Nob wonders whether Carol killed Cob’s sow. Nob wonders nothing about Dagmar.

Here Hob thinks that there is a witch who blighted Bob’s mare, satisfying (6)’s first conjunct.

Moreover, Carol is the only mythical witch who Hob thinks blighted Bob’s mare, and Nob wonders whether Carol killed Cob’s sow, satisfying (6)’s second conjunct. Thus (6) is true. But (1) on (G) is intuitively false, since Hob does not think that Carol is a witch. It follows that (6) being true is not sufficient for (1) on (G) to be true. Since (6) being true is neither necessary nor sufficient for (1) on (G) to be true, (6) incorrectly analyses (G).⁵

⁵ More recently, Salmon suggests an analysis that essentially replaces ‘the mythical witch’ in (6) with ‘the supposed witch’, where a supposed witch is taken to be any object that is thought to be a witch. (2008: 271*n*16) The resulting variant of (6) is vulnerable to the following counterexample (even if we adjust the variant so it entails that *Hob* thinks the supposed witch is a witch):

There is a mythical witch named Kay, and a spinster named Linda. Hob sees Linda sitting on her porch and mistakes her for Kay. He thinks, “Kay, the witch sitting over there, blighted Bob’s mare.” Nob, independently, thinks that Kay is a witch and wonders if she killed Cob’s sow.

Here (1) on (G) is intuitively true, but the variant of (6) in question is not true; its *dthat*-term has no content, since there are *two* supposed witches, Kay and Linda, that Hob thinks (are witches who) blighted Bob’s mare.

5. Another Analysis

The counterexamples considered thus far reveal two general problems with Salmon's analyses. The first problem is that his analyses both entail that Hob and Nob are thinking about a mythical witch. This is too restrictive. (1) on (G) may be true even if Hob and Nob are *not* thinking about a mythical witch, as in Example 2 where they are thinking about a spinster. The second problem is that neither of Salmon's analyses entail that Hob thinks of the key suspect that it is a witch. This is not restrictive enough, as evidenced by Examples 3 and 4.

Here is an original analysis that avoids the problems just mentioned and still salvages many of the good features of Salmon's analyses.

- (7) $\exists x$ [(Hob thinks that x is a witch that blighted Bob's mare) and (Nob wonders whether x killed Cob's sow)].⁶

This proposal does not entail that Hob and Nob are thinking about a mythical witch. It requires merely that they are thinking about *something* in common. The shared object of their thoughts could be a mythical witch, a spinster, or anything else. This feature makes (7), like (1) on (G), true in Examples 1 and 2—in which Hob and Nob are thinking about a mythical witch (Samantha) and a spinster (Abigail), respectively. Moreover, (7) entails that Hob thinks of the key suspect that it is a witch. This feature makes (7), like (1) on (G), false in Examples 3 and 4. Thus, (7) is immune to all of the counterexamples considered thus far, and it handles Example 1, which is not intended to be a counterexample but is still an important test case.

These considerations once led me to believe that (7) was a correct analysis of (1) on (G).

Alas, there are further counterexamples. Consider Example 5:

⁶ Perhaps it would be better to require that Nob think that the alleged witch is a witch, or at least that he *not* think that it is *not* a witch (in which case he could remain agnostic). My intuitions are hazy. In any event, this issue has no bearing on the criticisms offered in this paper.

Example 5

Gotham newspapers report that two witches are in town: “Ethel” and “Fay.” According to the newspapers, one and only one of these two witches has been causing mayhem. No accusations are made about who in particular is the culprit. In reality, Ethel and Fay are mythical witches, and any “mayhem” is due to natural causes. Hob and Nob believe the stories. Hob thinks, “The witch out of Ethel and Fay that is causing mayhem blighted Bob’s mare.” Nob thinks, “Did the witch out of Ethel and Fay that is causing mayhem kill Cob’s sow?” (Nob has no thoughts about Hob or Bob’s mare.)⁷

Here (1) on (G) is intuitively true. (7), however, is false. There is no object, such that (a) Hob thinks it is a witch that blighted Bob’s mare, and (b) Nob wonders whether it killed Cob’s sow. Although Hob and Nob think that either Ethel or Fay is causing mayhem, they have in mind no particular object (mythical or otherwise). It follows that (7) being true is not *necessary* for (1) on (G) to be true.

Salmon could try to defend (7) from this objection by conceding that (1) on (G) is true in Example 5 but denying that (7) is false. To this end he could argue that there is a third mythical witch in addition to Ethel and Fay: “the witch out of Ethel and Fay that is causing mayhem”. If there were such a mythical witch, then (7) would actually be true in Example 5. For, Hob would think that this mythical witch is a witch that blighted Bob’s mare, and Nob would wonder whether it killed Cob’s sow.

The problem with this defense of (7) is that it is especially implausible that there is a third mythical witch in Example 5. To see why, it might help to consider an analogous scenario involving fictional characters. Suppose that Arthur Conan Doyle wrote one of his mysteries so that, according to that story, either Holmes or Watson sneezed at time t_1 . Suppose that the text leaves it completely open who sneezed and that Doyle himself never decided who was the sneezer. Now, even if we suppose that fictional characters exist, it is implausible that Doyle’s indecision results in there being *three* relevant fictional characters: Holmes, Watson, and “the

⁷ I owe this example to Donald Martin. It is also a counterexample to (5) and (6).

one out of Holmes and Watson who sneezed at time t_1 ”. It is much more plausible that there are only two fictional characters—Holmes and Watson—and that according to the story, one of them sneezed. Analogously, even if we suppose that there are mythical objects (as I am doing for the sake of argument) it is implausible that in Example 5 there are three mythical witches—Ethel, Fay, and “the witch out of Ethel and Fay that is causing mayhem”. It is much more plausible that there are only two mythical witches—Ehtel and Fay—and that, according to the newspapers’ myth, one of them is causing mayhem.⁸

I take it, then, that there is no “third mythical witch” in Example 5. This keeps intact my argument, outlined above, for the claim that (7) being true is not *necessary* for (1) on (G) to be true. Example 6 shows that it is also not *sufficient*:

Example 6

Hob and Nob live on opposite sides of a mountain in separate villages that are completely isolated from each other. Hob’s village has a myth about a mythical witch named ‘Gertrude’. Nob’s village has an unrelated myth about a mythical witch named ‘Hagar’. One day Hob sees a toad and thinks that it is Gertrude in a magically transformed state. He points to the toad and thinks, “Gertrude, the witch disguised as this toad, blighted Bob’s mare.” The toad hops to Nob’s side of the mountain. Nob, coincidentally, infers that the toad is Hagar in toad-form and thinks, “Did Hagar, now disguised as this toad, kill Cob’s sow?”

Here (7) is true. There is something, namely the toad, such that (a) Hob thinks it is a witch that blighted Bob’s mare, and (b) Nob wonders whether it killed Cob’s sow. But (1) on (G) is intuitively false, since Hob and Nob are thinking about *different* witches in the relevant sense; Hob is thinking about “Gertrude,” and Nob is thinking about “Hagar.” It follows that (7) being

⁸ Exaggerated variants of Example 5 can make the point even stronger. Suppose that Salmon were to insist that there is a third mythical witch in Example 5. He would then be committed to accepting that there could be examples where (a) everyone believes that there are only *two* witches—“Ethel” and “Fay”—but (b) there are still *hundreds* of related mythical witches: e.g., “the witch out of Ethel and Fay that is causing mayhem”, “the witch out of Ethel and Fay that wears green shoes”, “the witch out of Ethel and Fay that is 5 feet 6 inches tall”, “the witch out of Ethel and Fay that is 5 feet 7 inches tall”, etc. This seems like too many mythical witches.

true is not sufficient for (1) on (G) to be true. Since (7) being true is neither necessary nor sufficient for (1) on (G) to be true, (7) incorrectly analyzes (G).

6. Conclusion

The preceding discussion indicates that it is difficult (if not impossible) to devise a genuine solution to the Hob-Nob puzzle that relies on Salmon's theory of mythical objects. His analyses and the original variant considered here all incorrectly analyze (G). I say this while still supposing that his theory of mythical objects is correct. Of course, if this supposition turns out to be false, his analyses and any closely related variant could face serious problems not considered here.

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