(IN THE FICTION/MYTH)
THE NUMBER SEVENTEEN CROSSES THE RUBICON

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Introduction

Millianism, the view that the semantic contents of certain simple singular terms (such as ordinary proper names) are simply their referents, faces two major obstacles: one involves the apparent failure of substitutivity in certain contexts (such as propositional attitude ascriptions); the other involves the apparent meaningfulness of sentences containing nonreferring terms. Nathan Salmon, perhaps Millianism's staunchest advocate, has over the course of his career mounted a sustained defense against the first of these objections. And in a recent article (Salmon 1998) he offers a thorough discussion of the second, giving an account of many different sorts of sentences involving a wide variety of different types of (apparently) nonreferring terms. In particular, there is an extensive discussion (which continues in Salmon 2002) of names that are involved in fictions and myths—names such as 'Sherlock Holmes' and 'Vulcan'. In this paper, I explain and rebut a tempting criticism of Salmon's view.

1 Salmon's View

Sentences such as 'Sherlock Holmes is a detective' and 'Vulcan was believed by Le Verrier to cause perturbations in the orbit of Mercury' appear to be meaningful (that is, they appear to express propositions) in spite of the fact that their subject terms lack referents. This fact obviously presents a problem for any view according to which sentences that contain nonreferring names fail to express propositions. Salmon and Kripke each favor such a view,[1] so each has offered an account of the names that are involved in fictions and myths, where a 'myth' is understood as a *false theory that has been mistakenly believed*.[2] Though very different, their views share a common and intuitive ontology.[3]

1.1 Ontology

The ontology is straightforward—and seems to be a commitment of our everyday language, as has been argued by Kripke (1973) and van Inwagen (1977, 1983). Taking an example from van Inwagen (1977: 302), we say things like the following: "There are characters in some 19th-century novels who are presented with a greater wealth of physical detail than is any

character in any 18th-century novel". Taken at face-value, this sentence quantifies over fictional characters and entails their existence. Taking a more homely example, we say things like 'Conan Doyle created Holmes'. We do not think that in creating Holmes, Conan Doyle created a *flesh and blood man* (however godlike Conan Doyle is, he is not godlike in that respect); rather we think that he created a *fictional character* (still some kind of accomplishment for a mere mortal). Finally, taking a "Salmonesque" (2002: 116) example, we say things like this: A (merely) hypothetical intra-Mercurial planet (namely Vulcan) was hypothesized by Babinet and believed by Le Verrier to affect Mercury's perihelion, but there has never been a hypothetical planet whose orbit was supposed to lie between Mercury and Venus. Again, taken at face-value, such a sentence quantifies over "mythical" planets. Mythical planets of course need not be planets, in just the way that toy ducks need not be ducks.[4]

So just what sort of thing are these fictional/mythical objects? It is most natural to take them to be some sort of abstract entity: something like numbers on a Platonist's conception. Kripke explicates their nature in this way.

> A fictional character, then, is in some sense an abstract entity. It exists in virtue of more concrete activities of telling stories, writing plays, writing novels and so on, under criteria which I won't try to state precisely, but which should have their own obvious intuitive character. It is an abstract entity which exists in virtue of more concrete activities in the same way that a nation is an abstract entity which exists in virtue of concrete relations between people. A particular statement about a nation might be analyzable out in virtue of a more complicated one about the activities of people, or it might not[.]...But, at any rate, the statement about the nation is true in virtue of, and solely in virtue of, the activities of the people. I hold the same thing to be true of fictional characters. Thus they are not Meinongian entities which, so to speak, automatically exist. They exist in virtue of certain activities of people just as nations do. Of course, a fictional person isn't a person. There aren't in addition to the people who actually lived in London in the nineteenth century fictional people who did so. (1973: III.20)[5]

In a similar vein, Salmon writes,

> Such *mythical objects* are real things, though they are neither material objects nor mental objects ("ideas"). They come into being with the belief in the myth. Indeed, they are created by the mistaken theory's inventor, albeit without the theorist's knowledge. But they do not exist in physical space, and are, in that sense, abstract entities. They are an unavoidable by-product of human fallibility. (2002: 112)

So it seems that fictional/mythical objects, although they are like numbers (on a Platonist conception), in that they are abstract entities, are unlike

numbers in that they supervene on the activities of beings who tell stories and who build mistaken theories. They exist only contingently, as creations of Conan Doyle, Le Verrier, and you and me.

1.2 Semantics

The disagreement between Salmon and Kripke comes in their semantic accounts.[6] According to Kripke, names such as 'Holmes' are ambiguous between two readings: one in which the name is nonreferring—the reading that is presumably operative in the usually intended reading of 'Holmes does not exist'—and a second in which the name refers to the fictional (or mythical, as the case may be) object.[7] For clarity, I will write, for example, 'Holmes$_1$' for the nonreferring name and 'Holmes$_2$' for the name that refers to the fictional character.[8] *On Kripke's view, it is the nonreferring name that occurs in the sentences that are in the fiction itself.* In sharp contrast, *according to Salmon, 'Holmes' univocally refers to the fictional character.* To put it another way, according to Salmon, all occurrences of 'Holmes' are occurrences of 'Holmes$_2$'.[9]

In order to make clear the differences between Kripke's and Salmon's semantic views, I will explain each of their accounts of

(1) Holmes is a detective, which, for the purposes of this essay, I will assume is contained in the stories by Conan Doyle.[10]

1.2.1 Kripke's Semantic Account[11]

(1)   is ambiguous between the following:

(1a)   Holmes$_1$ is a detective.

(1b)   Holmes$_2$ is a detective.

(1a) fails to express a proposition, since 'Holmes$_1$' fails to refer. (To be more accurate, I should have written '*any use of* (1a) fails to express a proposition …', but I will avoid the cumbersome addition except in cases where its omission is likely to cause confusion.) So regardless of whether one evaluates (1a) with respect to the fiction or with respect to the real world, it lacks a truth-value (since it fails even to express a proposition).[12] (1b) however does express a proposition, since 'Holmes$_2$' refers to the fictional character. Evaluated with respect to the real world, (1b) is false, since fictional characters are not the sorts of things that can be detectives: it does no good to try to phone up a fictional character when one needs some sleuthing done.[13] Evaluated with respect to the fiction, things are rather complicated. Predicates can apply in at least two ways: "In the one case one [applies] the predicate straight; in the other case one [applies] it according to a rule in which it would be true, if the ["]people["] are so described in the

story. And ambiguities can arise here because of these two uses of the predicate" (1973: III.21). On the straight reading then, (1b) is false: the fiction says nothing at all about Holmes$_2$ (the fictional character); rather the fiction is solely concerned with the nonexistent Holmes$_1$. On the "bent" reading though, (1b) is true, that is, it is true that Holmes$_2$ is-a-detective* (where 'is-a-detective*' indicates the bent predicate).[14]

1.2.2 Salmon's Semantic Account[15]

(1) is unambiguous: it expresses a proposition, the very one that is expressed by (1b). Evaluated with respect to the real world, it is false—again because fictional characters are not the sorts of things that can be detectives. Evaluated with respect to the fiction, it is true (flat-out): since the fiction itself contains (1), and since 'Holmes' can only refer to 'Holmes$_2$', we can say (a little loosely—see §1.3) that the fiction itself says that Holmes$_2$ is a detective.

1.3 Semantics and Pretense

Although Salmon thinks that the sentence in the fiction 'Holmes is a detective' might be said (in a sense) semantically to refer to the fictional character Holmes, he does not think that Conan Doyle, in writing that sentence of the story, himself referred to anything. Consider an analogy. The sentence 'Clinton is an arrant liar' might be said (in a sense) semantically to refer to the former president. Now suppose that I am acting in a community theater play in which I play the part of a zealot from the Religious Right. In acting the part—in uttering the line 'Clinton is an arrant liar'—I do not myself assert the proposition, and so, the thought goes, I do not refer to Clinton, although the sentence does (in a sense) semantically express a sentence that contains a term that does (in a sense) refer. In the same way, Salmon thinks that Conan Doyle does not refer to the fictional character Holmes; rather Conan Doyle merely pretends to refer to him—or merely pretends to be Watson referring to him. To be a little more accurate—to lose the "in a sense" qualifications—here is Salmon's view. *Sentences themselves can be said to express or fail to express this or that proposition only relative to a specific (type of) use. Conan Doyle does not actually give sentences like 'Holmes is a detective' any use, but he pretends to. And the use that he pretends to give is the same as the use that a confused person who mistakes the stories for a factual chronicle gives it. And that use is one on which it expresses the proposition that Holmes$_2$ is a detective.*[16]

Kripke has a similar view about what Conan Doyle is doing. He would agree with all but the final sentence in the italicized part of the previous

paragraph: for Kripke, the use is supposed somehow to involve 'Holmes$_1$,'. One might say that for Kripke, (1) in the story fails to express a proposition "twice over": first, because Conan Doyle does not give it any use, but just pretends to; and second, because that use—the one that Conan Doyle pretends to give it—fails, for lack of a referent, to express a proposition.

2 A Rebuttal to a Tempting Criticism

Salmon offers many reasons to prefer his account to Kripke's, but there is one obvious way in which Kripke's account may seem preferable. We have already seen that on both accounts, when Conan Doyle writes, 'Holmes is a detective', he engages in a kind of pretense, but that the accounts differ over the exact nature of this pretense. We might say that on Kripke's account, Conan Doyle pretends that (1a)—which even if it were used genuinely would not in fact express any proposition—can, if used genuinely, express a proposition and also pretends that this (pretend) proposition is true. That seems vaguely understandable. In contrast, we might say that on Salmon's account, Conan Doyle merely pretends that (1b)—which *does* express a proposition when used genuinely—is true. This seems a bit odd: how can one pretend that a claim that an abstract object (like Holmes$_2$) has a "concrete property" (like being a detective) is true? In general, it would seem that we have no idea how to accomplish such a feat: just try pretending that the number seventeen crossed the Rubicon.

Salmon has commented, "It is frequently objected even by those who countenance mythical objects that the Vulcan theory, for example, is merely the theory that there is an intra-Mercurial planet, not the bizarre hypothesis that the relevant abstract entity is that planet" (2002: 115). Although Salmon offers a brief rebuttal to this sort of criticism (particularly in Salmon 1998: 316, n. 45), the objection continues to rear its head.[17] To see what is wrong with this thought, it will be helpful to look at a couple of other cases that Salmon discusses.[18]

The ancients famously thought (mistakenly) that what they called 'Hesperus' (well, some Acadian version of that) was a bright star, so, according to Millianism, they believed a proposition that has as its elements a particular planet (namely Venus) and the property of being a bright star. This is to say that *in some sense* they attributed to a planet the property of being a bright star. Now is this an odd thing to do? Well, it does seem odd for anyone to say something like 'The planet Hesperus is a star'. But that, of course, is not the only way of attributing to a planet the property of being a star: 'Hesperus is a bright star' does quite nicely for that. And that is presumably more or less how the ancients did it. Because they thought that

Hesperus was a star—and not a planet—they attributed to it (the planet) the property of being a bright star. That we humans make misattributions, odd or otherwise, is a commonplace.

Babinet famously thought (mistakenly) that what he dubbed 'Vulcan' was an intra-Mercurial planet. Salmon treats this kind of case on analogy with the Hesperus case. On Salmon's view, Babinet believed a proposition that has as its elements a particular abstract object (namely the mythical planet Vulcan) and the property of being an intra-Mercurial planet. This is to say that *in some sense* Babinet attributed to an abstract object the property of being an intra-Mercurial planet. Now is this an odd thing to do? Well, it does seem odd for anyone to say something like 'The mythical planet Vulcan is (really) an intra-Mercurial planet'. But that, of course, is not the only way of attributing to a mythical planet the property of being (really) an intra-Mercurial planet: 'Vulcan is (really) an intra-Mercurial planet' does quite nicely for that. Because Babinet thought that Vulcan was a planet—and not a mythical planet—he attributed to it (the merely mythical planet) the property of being (really) an intra-Mercurial planet. Again, that we humans make misattributions, odd or otherwise, is a commonplace.

Now, what have these cases to do with the claim that we have no idea how to engage in the kind of pretense that Salmon's account says we engage in? These cases show that we are able to understand what it is to *assert* certain odd claims—like the proposition that involves a particular planet (Venus) and the property of being a bright star and like the proposition that involves a particular abstract object (the mythical object Vulcan) and the property of being (really) an intra-Mercurial planet. Now, if we are able to understand what it is to *assert* such alleged oddities, then surely we can understand what it is to *pretend to assert* them. Given that I can understand what it is for the ancients to have asserted of Hesperus—the very planet Venus!—that it is a bright star, how can my knowledge that Hesperus is a planet, prevent me from pretending to assert what they really asserted? Similarly, given that I can understand what it is for Babinet to have asserted of Vulcan—the very mythical object!—that it is an intra-Mercurial planet, how can my knowledge that Vulcan is a mythical object, prevent me from pretending to assert what Babinet really asserted? Finally, then, what is to prevent Conan Doyle from pretending to assert of Holmes—that very fictional object that Conan Doyle knows to be a fictional object!—that he is a detective?

I believe that Salmon himself has already made this point quite nicely—if briefly—in an endnote in which he asks,

In reading [or writing] a piece of fiction, do we pretend that an abstract

entity is…a brilliant detective…? The question is legitimate….Taken *de dicto*, of course not; taken *de re*, exactly. That abstract entities are human beings is not something we pretend, but there are abstract entities that we pretend are human beings. (Salmon 1998: 316, n. 45).

The objector might respond that appealing to the *de re/de dicto* distinction does not really help, since it merely presents Salmon with an unhappy dilemma. Either *de re* thoughts are reducible to *de dicto* thoughts or they are not. *First horn*: If the *de re* is reducible to the *de dicto*, then really there is no *de re/de dicto* distinction, and hence appealing to it cannot help. *Second horn*: If *de re* thoughts are not reducible to *de dicto* ones, then elements of the conceptual content of a given thought will not by themselves determine the object that the thought concerns. There would have to be some nonconceptual relation between the thinker and the *res*. But, in the case of abstract objects, it is unclear what such a nonconceptual relation could consist in. It could not, for example, be a causal relation. [19]

A Millian like Salmon would of course deny that the first horn represents a genuine possibility. [20] But even granting the possibility of *de re/de dicto* reductionism, there is a problem with the first horn. *De re/de dicto* reductionism holds that the *de re* thought that the-abstract-object-Holmes is a detective is reducible to some *de dicto* thought, which I will simply call *the thought that* p.[21] Recall now that Salmon's point was that even if a person does not pretend *de dicto* that the-abstract-object-Holmes is a detective (just as the Ancients did not believe *de dicto* that the-planet-Hesperus was a star), he may still pretend it *de re* (just as the ancients had the *de re* belief that the-planet-Hesperus was a star). So, to put Salmon's point in the reductionist context of the first horn of the objector's dilemma—where to pretend *de re* that the abstract-object-Holmes is a detective is to pretend *de dicto* that *p*— we can say that even if a person does not pretend *de dicto* that the-abstract-object-Holmes is a detective, he may still pretend (*de dicto*) that *p*. Thus we see that Salmon's point does not depend, as the first horn assumes it does, crucially on there being a "deep" *de re/de dicto* distinction; what it depends on is merely that there is a difference between what may be described at least superficially as a distinction between a *de re/de dicto* pretense, but which, if reductionism is right, is more properly described as a distinction between one *de dicto* pretense and another.

The first point to make about the second horn is that if it is damning of Salmon's view of pretense, it is also damning of any kind of *de re* propositional attitudes involving abstract objects. So, for example, if the criticism is right, one cannot believe *de re* of the number two that it is prime.

The next point to make is that on Salmon's view, as well as on Kripke's,

we enter into causal relations with abstract objects. Indeed their commitments to fictional characters derived from the recognition that, for example, Conan Doyle *created* Sherlock Holmes. Creation is, of course, a paradigm of a causal relation: to create something is to cause something to exist. The second horn simply denies that it is possible to enter into causal relations with abstract objects, but gives no reason for that denial.[22]

Thus we see that neither horn of the dilemma pierces Salmon's account.[23] *Therefore, at least as things stand, the "pretense objection" fails.*[24]

Notes

[1] Unlike Salmon, Kripke does not endorse Millianism; however he does, of course, seem to favor some sort of "referentialist" thesis according to which if certain simple singular terms lack referents, then the sentences containing them fail to express propositions.

[2] Salmon's account is in Salmon 1998 and Salmon 2002; Kripke's is in Kripke 1973. The use of 'myth' is Salmon's.

[3] Kripke (1973) and van Inwagen (1977, 1983) have argued that the ontology is a commitment of our everyday language. Van Inwagen thinks we ought to take these commitments seriously. Kripke is characteristically noncommittal. Having noted this though, I will follow the usual practice of writing as though Kripke endorses the ontology.

[4] For those who are inclined to insist that toy ducks *are* ducks (after all they are not, for example, rabbits), I grant that *there is a sense* in which we can say that toy ducks are ducks. But I want something in exchange: grant me that *there is a sense* in which toy ducks are *not* ducks (after all, you would not serve one for dinner—and not just because vegetarians may be present); now use this sense to understand my claim that mythical planets need not be planets.

[5] I give references to Kripke 1973, with a Roman numeral to indicate the lecture number, followed by a period, followed by an Arabic numeral to indicate the page number of the manuscript.

[6] Robertson (2000) also stresses that the difference between Salmon's and Kripke's accounts is semantic and not ontological. (To be more precise, she says that in considering these views, we should distinguish between ontology, semantics, and cognitive/functional theory, and that once we do this, we can say that Salmon and Kripke share their ontology, but not their semantic theories nor their cognitive/functional theories.)

[7] Here I take myself primarily to be expositing Salmon's understanding of Kripke, since that is what is relevant to my present concerns. I do not mean by this to suggest that I have (or lack) significant disagreements with Salmon's interpretation. Salmon's understanding of Kripke is given primarily in 1998: §IV and secondarily in §V.

[8] Here I am adopting Salmon's notation for disambiguation.

[9] I speak a little loosely here. Of course other things—people, dogs, computer

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programs, or what have you—might also be named 'Holmes'. For the purposes of this essay, I will assume that all uses of 'Holmes' have intimately to do with the Conan Doyle stories.

[10] Salmon and Kripke have much to say about other sorts of sentences that involve "fictional/mythical names"—most notably, both give accounts of apparently true negative existential statements like 'Holmes does not exist'. But for present purposes, it suffices to explain their accounts of sentences like (1).

[11] In this sub-sub-section, I write in Kripke's voice.

[12] Kripke (for example, 1973: VI.27 and III.4) does though want to say that (1a) evaluated with respect to the fiction is something we might call 'true*', where it is not entirely clear what that is, except that truth* is not truth.

[13] Actually, one might distinguish between fictional objects that are *wholly* fictional and those that are not (for example, a real person about whom a fiction has been written is in some sense a fictional object in virtue of being a part of the fiction). Here I generally talk only about wholly fictional objects. It does no good to phone up one of *those* when one needs sleuthing done.

[14] There are a few complications here that for my purposes do not matter. It may be worth noting that the bent reading of (1b) (evaluated with respect to the fiction) is then true iff (1a) (also evaluated with respect to the fiction) is true*. This is not to say that (1b) on the bent reading and (1a) say the same thing (evaluated with respect to the fiction). They do not: for one thing (1b) involves Holmes$_2$ and (1a) involves Holmes$_1$.

[15] In this sub-sub-section, I write in Salmon's voice.

[16] I thank Nathan Salmon for corresponding with me about this point. I have lifted nearly verbatim from one of his emails here. Salmon's discussion in the paper can be a little confusing, since he sometimes speaks of Conan Doyle's original *use* of 'Holmes' (see, for example, 1998: 294). He does generally qualify such claims with the phrase "in a sense" (see, for example, 1998: 299).

[17] For example, Sawyer (2002: 10) raises just such a question. (Citations are to the manuscript version of Sawyer's forthcoming paper.) In conversation, I have heard this sort of objection pursued by others who are also aware of Salmon's published comments on the "pretense objection".

[18] In this initial phase of response, I feel that I am merely putting meat on the bones of Salmon's own rebuttal to the objection. But, doing this seems to me necessary, since the objection continues to tempt people in spite of their awareness of Salmon's answer.

[19] Here I am modeling the objector's reply on Sawyer 2002: 8-13.

[20] Salmon (1997) does in fact deny any robust form of reductionism.

[21] Any reductionist presumably holds some fairly nuanced view, perhaps, for example, that the reduction of a *de re* claim about Holmes might involve a complicated *de dicto* claim about the literary activities of Conan Doyle. In any case no plausible reductionism would hold that the *de re* thought that an abstract entity is a detective simply reduces to the *de dicto* thought that an abstract entity is a detective. So, whatever the thought that *p* is, it is not simply the *de dicto* thought that the-abstract-object-Holmes is a detective.

[22] One line to consider is that perhaps the objector means to challenge the claim that fictional characters are abstract entities. (I should mention that here the objector would depart from Sawyer (2002), who is interested in offering a criticism that does not question Salmon's robust ontology.) After all, we do enter into causal relations with fictional characters, but, the thought would go, we do not enter into causal relations with abstract objects, so whatever fictional characters are, they are not abstract objects. I have a number of things to say about such a line, but due to length limitations, I refrain from saying them.

[23] And even if an abstract object—say, Paul Benacerraf's favorite number (a.k.a. seventeen)—could not be Julius Caesar, and even if seventeen could not cross the Rubicon, we can at least pretend *de re* (or even think—mistakenly of course—*de re*) that it does. (I am getting awfully close to an example from Kripke— I do not remember where or even whether it is published—in which a mathematician has given a woman's name—say, 'Martha'—to some kind of mathematical object—perhaps it was a Lie group. His wife hears him talking about Martha, maybe even hears him muttering the name in his sleep. Her suspicions are aroused. We might fill out this story by having the wife confide in a mutual friend—a friend who knows what Martha is. The friend might intelligibly laugh and say, "Oh, you thought he was having an affair with Martha! But Martha is only a Lie group." Thus the friend attributes to the wife the *de re* belief that her husband is having an affair with a mathematical object.)

[24] I thank Graeme Forbes, Tony Genova, Don Marquis, Nathan Salmon, and Jennifer Saul for their comments on earlier versions of this paper and/or for discussion of issues related to it.

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