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# Which witch is which? Exotic objects and intentional identity

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**Abstract** This paper is about intentional identity, the phenomenon of intentional attitudes (beliefs, desires, etc.) having a common focus. I present an argument against an approach to explaining intentional identity, defended by Nathan Salmon, Terence Parsons and others, that involves positing exotic objects (e.g. mythical objects, merely possible objects or non-existent objects). For example, those who adopt this sort of view say that when two astronomers had beliefs about Vulcan, their attitudes had a common focus because there is an exotic (abstract, non-existent or merely possible) object that both of their beliefs were about. I argue that countenancing these exotic objects does not help us explain intentional identity.

**Keywords** Intentional identity · Intentional attitudes · Geach · Intentionality · Empty names

## 1 Intentional identity

Some pairs of intentional attitudes (beliefs, desires, etc.) have a common focus. For example, my belief that London is populous and my belief that London is pretty have a common focus; they are both *about* London. It is natural, when confronted with ordinary cases like these, to suggest that, in general, attitudes have a common focus *because* there is an object that they are both about.

There are cases that appear to put pressure on this idea (Geach 1967). Some pairs of intentional attitudes have a common focus even when there appears to be no object

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that they are about. Let us use the label *empty attitudes* for attitudes that appear to be about something that does not exist. Examples of empty attitudes include beliefs about Vulcan or desires about the fountain of youth.

Consider scenario (a) a variant on a case originally introduced by Geach (1967).

(a) Hob and Nob live in the same village and read the same newspaper. The newspaper reports that a witch has been terrorising the village. Hob believes that a witch (the one mentioned in the newspaper) has blighted Bob's mare and Nob believes that the witch mentioned in the newspaper killed Cob's sow. Witches do not exist.

(1) may be true in scenario (a).

(1) Hob thinks a witch has blighted Bob's mare, and Nob believes she (the same witch) killed Cob's sow.

Hob's belief and Nob's belief appear to be directed at something that does not exist. Yet in scenario (a), Nob's belief *is*, in some sense, directed at the same thing as Hob's belief is, in spite of there apparently being no object at which both beliefs are directed. The truth of (1) requires that Nob's belief and Hob's belief have a common focus and, since their beliefs have a common focus at (a), (1) gets to be true at (a). Let us say that we have *intentional identity* when attitudes have a common focus. Theories of intentional identity are accounts of when and why there is intentional identity.[1]

Consideration of cases like this might lead us to contend, with Geach (1967, p. 627), Dennett (1968), Perry (2001, pp. 14, 147–156), Glick (2012), Sainsbury (2005, Chap. 7; 2010), van Rooy (2000, pp. 170–178), and others that attitudes can have a common focus in the relevant sense, even when there is no object that both attitudes are about.

Others, such as Salmon (2005, pp. 105–108), Priest (2005, p. 65 n.12), Parsons (1974, pp. 577–578) and Saarinen (1978, pp. 207–210), the *transparent theorists* as I will call them, deny that the existence of cases like (a) means that attitudes having a common focus does not involve their being about the same object. Instead, they claim that *apparently* empty attitudes are, appearances notwithstanding, about objects of some kind. I will often drop the 'apparently' from 'apparently empty' for the remainder of this article. When engaging with transparent theorists it is important not to take the use of the word 'empty' too seriously. Different transparent theorists say different things about the kind of objects that apparently empty attitudes are about. However, the central strategy is the same: claim that empty intentional attitudes are about exotic objects of some sort (usually merely possible, abstract or non-existent objects) and upholding the claim that having a common focus depends on the attitudes having a common object, even in the face of cases like (a). According to transparent theories of intentional identity non-empty attitudes get to have a common focus in virtue of their being about the same exotic object. Another way of understanding the

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[1] I will focus on attitudes with particular objects as targets, since considering these cases will be sufficient for me to put forward my arguments. However, a good theory of intentional identity will also be adaptable to cases in which beliefs are directed at classes of objects or kinds.

spirit of the transparent view is that the subject matter of an attitude is just whatever object it picks out, and this is all there is to subject matter individuation.[2]

There are several apparent benefits associated with understanding intentional identity in this way. Firstly, the transparent account fits well with ordinary talk concerning empty beliefs. Consider the case in which astronomers had beliefs concerning Vulcan. We naturally describe these beliefs as being *about Vulcan* and it is natural to describe several of those beliefs as being *about the same thing*, namely Vulcan. The transparent theorist can take these locutions at face-value.

Transparent theories deliver a uniform treatment of intentional identity across empty and non-empty attitudes. For the transparent theorist, empty beliefs are directed at objects in much the same way non-empty beliefs are. Having a common focus is, for the transparent theorist, always a matter of the attitudes being directed at the same thing. If all else being equal, we ought to prefer theories that treat empty and non-empty attitudes uniformly, then this is a point in favour of adopting a transparent theory of intentional identity.

The transparent theorist is able to account for communication and co-ordination of action in cases in which the relevant attitudes are empty in a natural and elegant way. Agents can communicate even when their relevant attitudes are empty. Astronomers successfully communicated about Vulcan and we ought to be able to make sense of this communication. What is more, agents can co-ordinate their action even when the object at which their actions are directed isn't there; bands of explorers undertook significant joint projects while searching for the fountain of youth, even though there is no such thing. Transparent theorists can handle these phenomena in a straightforward way; agents are able to communicate about an object and direct their actions toward that object in virtue of their relevant attitudes being *about* the very same object.

Lastly, transparent theories allow us to understand how agents could genuinely disagree about a thing even when the relevant attitudes are empty in a straightforward way. For example, explorers were able to disagree about where the fountain of youth was even though their attitudes concerning that object were empty. If we adopt a transparent account of intentional identity we can understand this disagreement in a straightforward way; the subjects disagree in cases like this because there is an object about which they have conflicting attitudes.

In this paper I argue that, despite these attractions, there are reasons for thinking that we ought not to posit exotic objects in the service of explaining intentional identity. My goal is *not* to argue that attitudes are never directed at particular abstract, merely possible or non-existent objects. Rather, my goal is to critique theories of intentional identity that *rely* on abstract, merely possible or non-existent objects. It may be that we ought to be committed to these exotic objects for some *other* reason but positing them does not yield any distinctive resources for understanding intentional identity. The reason, in a nutshell, is that there are too many exotic objects and not enough

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[2] Why am I not grouping Glick's approach with the transparent approaches? After all, Glick does appeal to exotic objects in his account of intentional identity. The difference is that, for Glick, intentional identity is a matter of the objects the respective attitudes are about *being counterparts*. For the transparent theorist, two attitudes have a common focus just in case there is some object x that they are both about. For Glick, two attitudes have a common focus just in case there is some object x and some object y such that one attitude is about x, the other is about y, and x and y are counterparts.

facts to which we can appeal when determining which exotic objects are assigned to which attitudes. When the objects in question are actual and concrete we can appeal to the object's place in the world (e.g. the causal relations it stands in) when explaining why a given belief is about that object rather than some other. However, when the objects in question are *exotic* there are no such resources available. This has important implications for the prospects of transparent approaches to intentional identity.

I will focus on a particular type of intentional attitude: *belief*. Considering beliefs will be sufficient to bring out the problem but the arguments could just as easily be made with cases involving other types of intentional attitudes.

The plan for the rest of this article is as follows: first I say more about the sort of exotic objects different transparent theorists appeal to. I then discuss what is required of a transparent theory in order to be an adequate theory of intentional identity. Next, I argue that transparent theorists run into trouble when they try to deliver the correct verdicts about certain sorts of cases. I then discuss and evaluate some responses to the problem available to transparent theorists. Finally, I draw out some lessons that ought to be taken from the discussion in this article.

Before I proceed, one caveat. The project of explaining intentional identity is *not* the project of providing a systematic syntactic/semantic analysis of the Geach sentences. In the literature much attention has been paid to the syntactic features of the Geach sentences.[3] For instance, (1) contains an anaphoric pronoun ('she'), a feature it has in common with many sentences that ascribe intentional identity. If one makes a brief survey of the literature, one may be forgiven for thinking that those working on intentional identity consider the question of the semantics of anaphoric pronouns to be inextricably linked to the question of when and why there is intentional identity. Indeed this conception of the issue comes across strongly from the way Geach originally poses the puzzle, in terms of a sentence for which we need to find an adequate semantic analysis. I do not understand the issue of intentional identity in this way. The reason is that some sentences ascribe intentional identity without having many of the grammatical features of Geach's sentences. For instance, consider (2).

(2) Hob and Nob fear the same witch.

(2) may be true when there are no witches.

The lesson is clear. It is one thing to understand what it is for attitudes to have a common focus, but it is another to understand the semantics of the Geach sentences, including the semantics of anaphora. The second issue is interesting and important but it is not the focus of this article. A similar distinction between the phenomenon of intentional identity and the question of how we should understand anaphora is made by Manning (2015, pp. 281–282).

## 2 Exotic objects

One sort of transparent theory, a version of which is defended by Salmon (1998, 2005), involves an appeal to abstract objects. If this is right, we can claim that two

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[3] See, for instance, King (1993), Cumming (2014) and Lanier (2014).

empty beliefs have a common focus just in case they are about the same mythical object. According to this sort of view, the truth of (1) does not require the existence of a concrete, flesh and blood witch, it merely requires the existence of an abstract mythical witch.

At this point, we might distinguish between *fictions* which are not supposed to be anything but fiction and *myths* which were mistakenly believed to be correct descriptions of the world. If the mythical object account is only supposed to handle cases involving fictions in the first sense, the account does not constitute a complete account of intentional identity. There will be cases of intentional identity in which the relevant agents sincerely believe in the existence of the objects in question. I will, therefore, only be concerned with the more general type of account, the type that applies both to objects of fiction and objects of myth.

Among those who countenance mythical objects we can distinguish mythical Platonists from mythical creationists. According to Platonists, actually existing mythical objects are eternal; subjects simply select from the set of actually existing mythical objects when they have empty beliefs and the relevant beliefs are about whatever object is selected. Creationists, in contrast, say that some abstract objects are created when certain conditions are met.[4] For instance, Vulcan, the mythical object, was literally created by le Verrier when he attempted to explain certain facts about Mercury's orbit by positing the existence of a planet he called 'Vulcan'. This distinction will be important below.

Other transparent theorists appeal to non-existent objects. For instance, Priest (2005, p. 65 n.12), Parsons (1974, pp. 577–578) and Saarinen (1978, pp. 207–210) claim that apparently empty beliefs are about non-existent objects and that empty beliefs have a common focus just in case there is a non-existent object that they are both about.

Transparent theorists might instead appeal to merely possible objects. In line with this proposal we would claim that empty intentional states are about possible objects and that intentional identity is a matter of beliefs being about the same object, actual or possible. We could then understand intentional identity between empty beliefs as depending on attitudes being about the same merely possible object. Of course, there appear to be cases in which the relevant intentional object is impossible. The question of how cases involving apparently impossible intentional objects should be understood is a difficult one. However, *if* the transparent theorist wants to account for such cases in roughly the same way that they deal with cases involving possible intentional objects, then they will also have to include impossible objects into their account.

## 3 Assignment

For transparent theorists, intentional identity is supposed to depend on the presence of an object that both attitudes are about. However, if we want an adequate account of intentional identity it is not enough to claim that when the beliefs are about the same object there is intentional identity. We need a story about when and why attitudes get

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[4] Some notable creationists are Thomasson (1996, pp. 300–307, 1999, pp. 5–14), Salmon (1998, esp pp. 293–296) and Kripke (2013, pp. 71–78).

to be about the same object. Without an account of this sort transparent theories do not yield verdicts about intentional identity in particular cases. Why, for example, are Hob's belief and Nob's belief about the same object in scenario (a)? We are told that, if (1) is true they are about the same object but we are not told *when* and *why* they are about the same object.

Call an account of why attitudes are about the objects they are about an *assignment principle*. If the presence of an exotic object is going to help us explain intentional identity, we are owed an account of when and why attitudes are about the same exotic object. Call the challenge of providing such an account *the assignment challenge*.

## 4 The hard cases

The argument I present below concerns what I will call *the hard cases*. The hard cases are the cases in which, according to the transparent theorist, attitudes are assigned exotic objects rather than concrete-everyday objects.

It may be that they will be unable to provide an account of when attitudes are about the same everyday concrete object. The issue of how attitudes get to be about the objects they are about is, after all, notoriously vexed. However this may be, if I am right, the transparent theorist's resources will not yield correct verdicts about the presence of intentional identity in certain cases. Since what is distinctive about transparent theories is their treatment of the intentional identity in the hard cases, their getting these cases wrong is enough to undermine the transparent approach to intentional identity.

To make my case I need to make two observations about the hard cases and one suggestion about what might constrain how objects should be assigned to empty beliefs.

### 4.1 Abundance

The first observation is that, if we are committed to such things, there is an abundance of non-existent objects, possible objects and, at least for the mythical Platonist, mythical objects; there are a huge number of exotic objects to choose from when assigning objects to attitudes. Those who appeal to non-existent objects, for instance, are fond of saying that for (almost)[5] any set of properties, there is an object, existent or non-existent, which has those properties. The set of possible objects is also abundant; for every way a thing could be there is a possible object that is that way.[6] For the mythical Platonist there is also an abundance of mythical objects. All the mythical objects we could ever dream up, and more, exist as abstracta. Creationists about mythical objects are in a position to claim that the set of mythical objects is, for them, less abundant as only those objects that have been created exist. I will set aside the moves that are uniquely available to the creationists until Sect. 6.3.

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[5]  The constraints Meinongians put on this claim need not concern us here.

[6]  The kind of transparent theorist that appeals to merely possible objects may have to posit even more objects to handle intentional identity between attitudes at other possible worlds, depending on the transparent theorist's approach to merely possible objects in general.

If we are to understand empty beliefs as being about objects, an abundance of objects is necessary if we are to capture the content of *all* empty beliefs that appear to be directed at objects. For any such empty belief there needs to be at least one corresponding object. If a transparent theorist takes some non-existent, merely possible or mythical objects out of the picture so that they cannot, even in principle, be assigned to empty beliefs, they will lose the ability to capture the content of some empty beliefs, in particular those empty beliefs that are best interpreted as being about those objects. To put it another way, we should never run out of objects when assigning objects to empty beliefs. There should be no point at which our ontology of objects comes in and dictates that we cannot have this or that object-directed empty belief. If a transparent theorist significantly limits the relevant set of objects, she would limit the expressive power of her theory.

Why couldn't the transparent theorist claim that they need only appeal to the relevant sort of objects in some cases but not others? If this were right, the abundance observation could be rejected, or at least weakened. The reason we should be concerned about this move is that it leads to an undesirably disjunctive account of intentional identity, with intentional identity being accounted for in terms of the attitudes having a common object in some cases and in some other way in others.

## 4.2 Poverty

The second observation is that in the hard cases there are very few resources available to explain why one exotic object rather than another is assigned to a given attitude. One way to bring out this poverty in the hard cases is by considering the resources that *are* apparently available when assigning actual, concrete, existing objects to non-empty beliefs.

When deciding which objects to assign to a non-empty belief, we can often appeal to the object's place in the world and its relationship to the believer. For instance, why are my beliefs concerning London about London rather than Paris? A natural thought is that London, but not Paris, stands in the right sort of causal relation with my London beliefs and, if we make our theory of intentional identity sensitive to that fact, then we can explain why my belief is assigned one city rather than the other. London and Paris are causally related to me in different ways, and this fact might explain why my London beliefs are assigned the object London rather than Paris. This sort of view flows nicely from the work of Donnellan (1970, pp. 355–356), Putnam (1975), Kripke (1980, pp. 96–97) and others.

Another kind of resource to which some appeal in non-empty cases are eligibility facts. According to this idea, some objects are just more eligible than others to be what attitudes are about. Some contend that some actual, concrete and existent objects are more natural than others, in that they have boundaries that carve nature relatively close to its joints and we can appeal to these sorts of facts about naturalness when assigning objects to beliefs. If this is right, a given belief can be about an object x and not about an object y in virtue of the fact that x is more eligible than y. A well-known example of a theory with this general structure is discussed by Lewis (1983, pp. 370–377; 1984, p. 227) and somewhat similar theories are defended by Sider (2009) and Weatherson

([2003](#)). I should emphasise that the eligibility constraints are not supposed to do *all* the work in determining which object is assigned to an intentional attitude; they are supposed to work in tandem with other constraints.

But when deciding which exotic object to assign to an empty belief we cannot, it seems, appeal to these sorts of causal and eligibility facts. Exotic objects do not have a unique place in the world in the same way that London and Paris do. Merely possible objects appear not to make a causal difference to the actual world. For the mythical Platonist, mythical objects do not causally interact with concrete objects like Hob and Nob. For both the creationist and the mythical Platonist, abstracta do not make a causal difference to concrete objects or events. For these reasons, we cannot, it seems, appeal to causal constraints when we are assigning one possible, non-existent or mythical object to an empty belief rather than another. For everyone but the creationist the objects in question appear not to have a place in the causal order of things, non-existent objects do not causally interact with existent objects. Again, I will discuss resources that are uniquely available to the creationist in Sects. [6.3](#) and [6.4](#).

It is also unclear whether there are the right kind of relations of comparative eligibility standing between these exotic objects. It is intuitive and plausible that an object like Barack Obama has boundaries that match objective joints in nature better than an object that has Barack Obama and Jupiter as parts. Maybe planet-people are less eligible than planets or people. The trouble is that there do not seem to be the appropriate objective joints in the space of exotic objects. After all, not just any eligibility constraint will help the transparent theorist answer the assignment challenge. An eligibility constraint, if it is going to help, must distinguish different particular objects and not just different *kinds* of objects. We are interested in which witch is which not in the distinction between witches and some other kind of exotic object. It may be, for instance, that merely possible, abstract or non-existent witches are more eligible to be what beliefs are about than merely possible, abstract or non-existent shwitches (where 'shwitch' is a relatively gerrymandered kind) but this kind of relative eligibility will not help much with the assignment challenge. We are looking for an explanation of why a *particular object* is assigned to an attitude, not an explanation of why a certain *kind* of object is assigned to the attitude; we want an attitude about *Vulcan*, not merely an attitude about planets.

According to another conception of eligibility, some entities are relatively eligible in virtue of having a relatively simple definition or description in terms of certain special fundamental properties. The non-existent, possible or mythical witches do not appear related to fundamental properties of this sort, at least not at the actual world. It is not obvious, for instance, that these exotic objects stand in the same kind of relation to fundamental properties as the tree outside my office does. It is even less clear that any *one* witch is more intimately related to the fundamental properties than another witch is.

There may be good reasons to be suspicious of appeals to eligibility facts, even in non-empty cases. However, whatever one's attitude to eligibility constraints in non-empty cases, one should at least be *more* suspicious of views that appeal to eligibility facts among non-existent, merely possible or mythical objects.

In the non-empty cases it is at least open to us to appeal to causal constraints or eligibility constraints on assignment, though appeals to these constraints are by no means straightforward or uncontroversial.[7] The hard cases are *impoverished* in that these resources appear to be absent; the objects in question do not have a distinctive place in the world to which we can appeal when assigning them to attitudes.

### 4.3 The natural suggestion

What facts *can* the transparent theorist appeal to when assigning exotic objects to empty attitudes? A natural suggestion is that how the believer takes the target of their belief to be puts some constraints on which objects we ought to assign to that belief. For instance, why are beliefs concerning Vulcan about a non-existent, merely possible or mythical planet rather than a non-existent, merely possible or mythical elephant? A natural suggestion is that the believers take the target of their beliefs to be a planet and not an elephant. Le Verrier conceived of a planet, not an elephant and those who have beliefs concerning Vulcan tend to believe that the putative target of their belief is a planet. Call the way that the believer takes the target of their belief to be, the properties they believe it to have, the believer's *characterisation* of the target.

*The natural suggestion* as I will call it, says that, in the hard cases, the believer's characterisation of the target of their belief, constrains which non-existent, merely possible or mythical objects ought to be assigned to that empty belief. We may appeal to the extent to which different objects *fit* the believer's characterisation of the target when assigning exotic objects to beliefs.

There is a puzzle about how the objects of empty beliefs are supposed to have the properties they are characterised as having. In what sense is Vulcan a planet? In what sense did Sherlock Holmes live in London? I will put these issues to one side. Even if the objects do not, strictly speaking, have the properties they are characterised as having, there will, presumably, be some principled way of talking about members of the relevant set of objects *fitting* characterisations.

The abundance observation, the poverty observation and the natural suggestion are somewhat compelling and I will work in accordance with them for the time being. I will discuss some ways they might be resisted in Sect. 6.1.

## 5 The challenge

With the abundance observation, the poverty observation and the natural suggestion in place, let us consider scenario (b).

(b) Hob and Nob live in the same village and read the same newspaper. The newspaper reports that a witch has been terrorising the village. Hob believes that the witch mentioned in the newspaper blighted Bob's mare. Nob thinks

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[7] See for instance Kroon's (1987) critique of causal theories of reference. The message of Kroon's excellent paper is that until those who appeal to causal constraints on reference specify *which* causal chains make for assignment in particular cases the causal theory ought not to be considered adequate. This is a challenge that causal theorists are, as far as I know, yet to adequately face.

the witch mentioned in the newspaper did not blight Bob's mare but did kill
Cob's sow. Witches do not exist.

(1) is true at scenario (b), Hob's belief and Nob's belief have a common focus. For
the transparent theorist to deliver this verdict about scenario (b) they must provide an
assignment principle that assigns the same object to Hob's belief and Nob's belief.

What kind of account could deliver this verdict? In line with the natural suggestion,
we might say that the extent to which an object fits the agents' respective characterisa-
tions of the target can play some role in determining which object the belief in question
is about. Hob and Nob characterise the target of their beliefs in different ways. Hob
thinks the target of Hob's belief blighted Bob's mare whereas Nob thinks the target
of Nob's belief did not blight Bob's mare. There are, according to abundance, two
distinct witches, one that fits Hob's characterisation but not Nob's characterisation
and another that fits Nob's characterisation but not Hob's and these two witches will
fit the respective characterisations better than any particular that witch fits both. If
all we have to go on when assigning objects to Hob's belief and Nob's belief is the
way they characterise the putative target *and* Hob and Nob characterise the target of
their beliefs differently, then these two objects ought to be assigned to Hob's belief
and Nob's belief respectively.[8] Thus, (1) would come out false because the relevant
beliefs would be assigned different objects. But this is the wrong result, at (b) Hob's
belief and Nob's belief do have a common focus; (1) is true in that scenario. So fit
constraints alone cannot yield *necessary* conditions on intentional identity.[9]

There is another kind of case that shows that, given the poverty and abundance
observations, considerations of fit cannot supply *sufficient* conditions on two attitudes
being assigned the same object. Consider scenario (c).

(c) Hob, a butcher in Arkansas, believes that a witch lurks under his bed and
she has blighted the mare of his neighbour Bob. Nob, a baker in Ukraine,
believes that a witch lurks under his (Nob's) bed and that she killed the sow
of Nob's neighbour Cob. Hob and Nob have never met and there has been
no relevant interaction between their social circles. Witches do not exist.

(1) is false in scenario (c), Hob's belief and Nob's belief do not have a common focus.
So, if a transparent account is correct, there ought *not* be an object that both belief are
about in scenario (c).

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[8] One option at this point is to posit inconsistent objects. An inconsistent object might fit both characteri-
zations in spite of their being inconsistent. This option is misguided. Since it would mean that, so long as we
are generous about inconsistent objects it would threaten to make *any* two empty attitudes have a common
focus, since no amount of difference in characterization could possibly rule out assigning the same object
to both attitudes.

[9] One might respond that only some parts of the respective agents' characterisations that matter for
intentional identity. Perhaps it is the part concerning the witch being reported by the newspaper as terrorising
the village. If this is right, the difference in their respective characterisations need not threaten intentional
identity since they share this 'core' piece of the characterisation. This response can be blocked by altering
the case slightly so that there are two articles with a common causal source, Hob and Nob read different
articles and, to make things vivid, have no knowledge of the existence of the other article. In this scenario,
there is no shared element of the characterisations that allows for this sort of move.

There is, if the abundance observation is correct, a non-existent, possible or mythical object that fits both Nob's characterisation of the target and Hob's characterisation of the target. It lurks under both beds and maligns both animals. If all we have to go on when assigning objects to these beliefs are considerations of fit, then this merely possible, non-existent or mythical witch (the one that lurks under both beds and maligned both animals) can be assigned to both beliefs, since it fits both characterisations. Nothing in either characterisation rules this object out, and since there appear to be no other constraints on assignment that could rule this object out, we may assign that object to both of the beliefs. But this is the wrong result; intuitively, Hob's belief and Nob's belief do not have a common focus in scenario (c); (1) is false at (c). What is more, cases like (c) are commonplace. There is nothing special about witches, Arkansas or Ukraine; assuming abundance, for any consistent pair of characterisations, there will be an exotic object that fits both characterisations. Cases like (c) that bring out this problem are, therefore, likely to be extremely easy to cook up. One might interject, at this stage, by saying that surely we can arrive at the correct verdict about scenario (c) by appealing to the fact that the attitudes do not have a common source like the attitudes in scenario (b) do. I will consider this option in detail below in Sect. 6.4.

These two sorts of cases show that, if poverty and abundance are both correct, considerations of fit cannot supply both necessary *and* sufficient conditions on intentional identity. The transparent theorist cannot come up with an account that will deliver the correct verdicts about *both* cases like (b) and cases like (c).

If we could appeal to some constraint other than fit we could avoid these hazards. For instance, if we could appeal to causal constraints we could say that one witch is causally connected with both beliefs in scenario (b) and that could allow us to assign the same object to the relevant beliefs in spite of the differences in how Hob and Nob characterise the target. perhaps if we could appeal to eligibility constraints we might be able to deliver the right verdict about scenario (c). We might then claim that the witch that lurks under both beds at (c) is less eligible than witches that lurk under just one bed and claim that, for this reason, we ought to assign different objects to the beliefs in that case.

But if the poverty observation is correct then no such resources are available in the hard cases. Apparently only fit constraints are available and, if the above argument is right, an account based only on fit cannot deliver the correct verdicts about cases like (b) *and* cases like (c). If the presence of an object that both attitudes are about is going to play a distinctive role in explaining intentional identity, we need a way of linking the relevant exotic objects to intentional attitudes that does not just involve considerations of fit. Thomasson (1996; 1999, pp. 56–57) makes a somewhat similar complaint about theories that individuate intentional objects in terms of the properties ascribed to them.

## 6 Responses

What avenues of response are available in the face of these challenges? The most obvious response is to resist one of the ingredients of my argument, abundance, poverty or the natural suggestion.

### 6.1 Resisting abundance, poverty or the natural suggestion

We might try denying abundance. However, as discussed above, this move comes at the cost of crucial expressive power. If we take some objects out of the picture so that they cannot, even in principle, be what empty beliefs are about, we will lose the ability to capture the content of some empty beliefs in line with the transparent account. Unless the transparent theorist wants to sacrifice expressive power, she ought to accept the abundance observation.

Should the transparent theorist deny the natural suggestion? To begin with, the natural suggestion is extremely plausible. It seems that how the believer takes the target of their attitude to be does constrain which objects those attitudes are about, even if fit constraints are not the only constraints in play. However, even if the natural suggestion is rejected we are no closer to an account of how empty intentional attitudes get to be about the exotic objects they are about. I was driven to make the natural suggestion because there appeared to be no other constraints on assignment that the transparent theorist could appeal to in the hard cases. The extent to which an object fits the relevant characterisation appeared to be the last fact linking attitudes to exotic objects. Rejecting the natural suggestion makes the assignment challenge even more pressing.

Another option is to resist the poverty observation. But what other constraints on assignment might a transparent theorist appeal to in the hard cases? Particular non-existent, merely possible or mythical objects do not seem to make a difference to actual, concrete events and objects so appealing to causal properties of the exotic objects themselves when assigning objects to empty beliefs seems ill advised.

An eligibility constraint of the right sort, if it could be imposed, would allow a solution to the assignment problem; the constraint involves a feature of the objects themselves. Recall that the eligibility constraint, if it is going to help in cases like (b) and (c), must distinguish between particular objects, not just between kinds of objects. There does not appear to be any independently plausible way of construing eligibility such that it both applies to the relevant space of objects and allows the appropriate distinctions between the relevant objects.

Another possibility is that I am not being sufficiently imaginative. There may be some other facts to which a transparent theorist could appeal when assigning objects to empty attitudes that would allow a transparent approach to be vindicated in the face of the challenge presented above. I will leave it to transparent theorists to attempt to provide an account of a constraint on assignment that will fit this bill.

### 6.2 Refusing the challenge

There is another response to the problem that is still on the table. This option involves resisting the claim that we even need a theory of how attitudes get to be about the exotic objects they are about. One might claim, as some are often tempted to when engaged in debates about the foundations of intentionality, that the aboutness relation that stands between attitudes and the objects that they are about is *primitive, brute* or in some other way unanalysable. In this way one might justify not facing up to the challenge

of providing an assignment principle on the grounds that any attempt to provide an explanation or analysis of the relation will be bound to fail. I admit that this is a way of sidestepping the problem. However, this position is unsatisfying to those engaged in the debate concerning how intentional identity ought to be understood. It may be that we will be unable to arrive at an adequate explanatory theory of intentional identity, but until we are reasonably confident that there can be no such theory we should, I propose, avoid resorting to a primitivism of this kind.

Another way of refusing the challenge involves claiming that there are facts concerning which attitudes are about the same exotic objects but that these facts are, in some crucial sense, unknowable. This claim amounts to view of intentional identity that is somewhat analogous to an epistemicist theory of vagueness, in particular it resembles the kind of epistemicism defended by Sorensen (1988). If this kind of view is correct there is, once again, no reason to think that any theory concerning which objects get assigned to which attitudes will be adequate. This is another way of refusing the challenge which, though open, is unsatisfying; we ought not give up looking for an explanatory theory of intentional identity quite so hastily.

### 6.3 Distinctive creationist options?

Are there any moves, available uniquely to creationists that will help them answer the challenge pressed above? According to the creationist, created abstracta are tied by dependence relations to concrete objects and events (creative events, mental states and so on). This fact may help explain when two agents have the same abstract object in mind and, in turn, help the creationist answer the challenge pressed above.[10] Agents can be causally related to these entities on which the abstract objects *depend* and one might hope that this fact holds the key for understanding intentional identity. Thomasson (1999, pp. 35–38) correctly emphasises the importance of these dependence relations for understanding created abstracta and reference thereto.

In scenario (a), for instance, Hob's belief and Nob's belief are causally connected to the same newspaper article; on reading the newspaper article, Hob and Nob formed beliefs that they intended to be about the witch mentioned in the newspaper. Although the alleged witch itself is *not* causally upstream of Hob's belief and Nob's belief, it may *depend* on something that is. For example, the abstract object might depend on the newspaper article or something causally upstream of the newspaper article such as its author's mental states. The causal chain that links Hob's belief and Nob's belief to the entities on which the abstract witch depends might explain how their beliefs get to be about the very same abstract witch. Thomasson (1999, pp. 43–54) gives an account of reference to fictional entities along very similar lines. Indeed, the availability of this account of reference to abstracta may constitute a major advantage for creationism over mythical Platonism.

This account delivers the correct verdicts about scenarios (b) and (c). In scenario (b) there is a causal chain linking the attitudes and that explains why there is intentional

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identity in spite of Hob and Nob disagreeing about the witch. In scenario (c) there is plausibly no causal chain linking the two attitudes together so the proponent of this account can deliver the correct verdict that there is no intentional identity in scenario (c).

Before I can evaluate this move, I need to make a crucial distinction and consider a broader strategy of which this Thomasson-inspired move is an example. This broader strategy will be the subject of the next section.

### 6.4 Hybridising

If a transparent theory is right, intentional identity depends on the presence of an object that the relevant attitudes are about. It is natural, when spelling out the details of a transparent theory, to look for principled ways of linking the *exotic objects themselves* to empty attitudes. But resources that essentially involve exotic objects are not the only resources available to explain intentional identity. There are, after all, many non-transparent theories of intentional identity in the literature that purport to explain intentional identity without making use of an exotic object.

At this point it will be helpful to distinguish *transparent* resources from *non-transparent* resources. Non-transparent explanatory resources characteristically do not make essential use of an object that the relevant attitudes are about. Some examples of non-transparent resources are causal links between attitudes, similarities in how the respective agents conceive of the putative target of their respective attitudes, and which concepts they employ.

Theories of intentional identity that appeal to transparent resources, on the other hand, make essential use of the presence of the objects themselves to explain intentional identity. For example, were a particular exotic object to make a distinctive causal difference to Hob and Nob, we would be able to appeal to these distinctive causal relations when explaining intentional identity. This would be a transparent resource, because under the supposition that there is no such object (exotic or otherwise) this explanation of intentional identity would falter.

To illustrate the distinction between transparent resources and non-transparent resources I will now give a brief description of some of the non-transparent theories available in the literature. Perry (2001, pp. 14, 147–156) and Sainsbury (2005, Chap. 7; 2010) claim that intentional identity is a matter of there being a causal chain that links the attitudes themselves together.[11] In scenario (a), for instance, there is a causal chain that goes via the newspaper article that links Hob's belief with Nob's belief and this causal link is supposed to explain the fact that those beliefs have a common focus. Perry (2001, pp. 150–160) and Sainsbury (2005, pp. 75–77, 237–238; 2010) are both explicit that they intend to account for intentional identity without claiming that empty attitudes are, in any sense, *about* an object. These accounts do not make essential use of the presence of an object that the relevant attitudes are about; what makes for intentional identity are the causal links between the attitudes.

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[11] There are reasons to think that theories based entirely on causal links will not be adequate, see Edelberg (1992) and van Rooy (2000, p. 179 n.22).

Others, like Dennett (1968) and King (1993, p. 76), attempt to account for intentional identity in terms of a shared conception of the target object. The idea is that if the agents characterise the target in similar enough ways then their empty attitudes come to have a common focus. These accounts appeal only to the agents' conception of the putative target and do not depend on there being an object that the relevant attitudes are about.

Another sort of non-transparent theory is presented by Geach (1967, p. 627). For Geach, intentional identity is a matter of the empty attitudes in question involving the same *aspect* (a kind of Frege-style mode of presentation). Some aspects are aspects *of* something. When I have beliefs about London, for instance, I employ an aspect that is an aspect *of* London. However, some aspects are not aspects *of* anything. If there are no witches, when I believe something about a particular witch, the witch aspect that is involved in my belief is not an aspect *of* a witch. Geach contends that there is intentional identity just in case there is one aspect that is involved in the relevant intentional attitudes. Geach's view is another example of a non-transparent account. If Geach is right, intentional identity depends on an aspect identity and not an object identity.

Geach's theory should be distinguished from a view according to which intentional identity is a matter of aspects representing the very same object. According to this view, there is intentional identity in virtue of there being an object that the relevant aspects are aspects *of*. We might call this the Geach–Frege view, so called because it gives an explanatory role to features of attitudes corresponding, roughly, to *sense* and *reference*.

The contrast between this account and Geach's account serves as an excellent illustration of the contrast between transparent and non-transparent resources. Geach's view involves only non-transparent resources, since if the aspects involved in the respective attitudes were not aspects *of* anything (not even an exotic object) then there might still be intentional identity if the attitudes involve the very same aspect. In contrast, if we adopt the Geach–Frege account, our explanation of the presence of intentional identity essentially involves there being an object that the relevant aspects are aspects *of*. Under the supposition that there is no such object (exotic or otherwise), the explanation of intentional identity in line with the Geach–Frege account falters. The Geach–Frege view qualifies as transparent.

With the distinction between transparent and non-transparent resources in place I can consider a general strategy still open to transparent theorists. This strategy involves appropriating some non-transparent resources and thereby *hybridising* their theory. The idea is to pick the best non-transparent account of intentional identity, whatever it might be, and appropriate the non-transparent resources that theory appeals to in the service of a transparent account. Transparent theorists who hybridise their theory get to deliver the same verdicts by copying the behaviour of the corresponding non-transparent account. Call transparent theories that involve an appeal to some non-transparent resources *hybrid theories*.

The Thomasson-inspired creationist view discussed in the previous section is a prime example of a hybrid theory. The causal chains between the attitudes and the events or objects on which the abstract object depends, are doing a large part of the work in explaining intentional identity. The defender of this kind of view still gets to

claim that there is intentional identity if, and only if, there is an object that the relevant attitudes are about. The explanation of *why* they are about the same object goes via the causal links.

Whatever its attractions, hybridising has profound implications for the prospects of transparent approaches to intentional identity. This is how I see the dialectic proceeding: the transparent theorists say that there is intentional identity between two attitudes because there is an object that they are both about. I then claim that if the exotic objects are going to help us explain intentional identity we need a story about *when* and *why* attitudes are about the same object. But when the transparent theorist attempts to tell this story in terms of transparent resources they run into the problem discussed in Sect. 5. I argued that transparent resources are insufficient in the hard cases. In turn, the transparent theorist needs to help herself to some non-transparent resources, if she is going to give a good explanation of intentional identity. However, if the transparent theorist concedes in this way and moves from a purely transparent theory to a hybrid theory, it is bad news for the transparent approach overall. The hybrid theorist only gets to deliver the correct verdicts by appropriating the non-transparent theorist's resources and by mimicking the corresponding non-transparent theory. According to non-transparent theorists, non-transparent resources alone are enough to provide an explanation of intentional identity. The hybrid theorist must claim that some set of non-transparent resources yields a good theory of intentional identity, on pain of not having a satisfactory set of non-transparent resources to appropriate. What is more, positing exotic objects yields no extra resources, if the poverty observation and the abundance observation are correct; adding the objects on top of the non-transparent resources does not do any extra explanatory work. Once we adopt a hybrid theory, it is not clear how intentional identity depends, in any deep way, on the presence of an object that the relevant attitudes are about.

For example, consider again the Thomasson-inspired view discussed above, the non-transparent resources to which the defender of this view appeals are available to non-transparent theorists. In fact, for Perry, it is precisely the causal chains and referential intensions to which the Thomassonian appeals that do *all* the work in explaining intentional identity. Perry's account corresponds to the Thomassonian's except that it stops short of the abstract objects themselves. What is more, if the above discussion is correct, the Thomasson-inspired view and Perry's corresponding non-transparent theory will deliver the very same verdicts and explanations concerning intentional identity. The presence of the object does no *extra* explanatory work, at least as far as explaining intentional identity goes.

# 7 Conclusion

Let us take stock. I have argued that if the abundance observation and the poverty observation are correct, the transparent theorist cannot deliver the correct verdicts about intentional identity, if they limit themselves to transparent explanatory resources. For this reason, we ought to be suspicious of transparent theories that limit themselves to transparent resources.

One seemingly attractive line of response available to the transparent theorist is the hybridising move. This option involves the transparent theorist conceding that transparent resources are insufficient to yield an adequate account of intentional identity, and supplementing their theory with characteristically non-transparent resources. But, as I argued in the previous section, this move undermines the overall transparent strategy, as it involves admitting that positing the objects does not give us any extra resources for explaining intentional identity.

We may have independent motivation to countenance exotic objects. If we are committed to exotic objects for some reason other than the need to explain intentional identity, we should expect them to show up when empty attitudes have a common focus. Another lesson from the above discussion is that the only reason for adopting a hybrid transparent account of intentional identity rather than the corresponding non-transparent alternative is that one is already committed to countenancing exotic objects for some other reason. Adding exotic objects does not help us explain intentional identity.

If a transparent theorist is also a kind of deflationist about the ontology of exotic objects, she might not be so worried about this result. For example, it is open to a deflationist about abstract objects like Thomasson (1996, 2014) or Schiffer (1996), to claim that the relevant facts about causal chains and referential intentions are simply *constitutive* of there being an abstract object that the attitudes are about. According to this kind of deflationist, once we have acknowledged the facts on which the objects and reference thereto depend, we will be able to infer that there is an object that the attitudes are about *for free*, so to speak. If this is right, the claim that there is an abstract object that the attitudes are about should be understood as descriptive rather than explanatory. This sort of move is still available, but does not take away from the central message of this paper. My goal was to argue that exotic objects do not help explain intentional identity. This sort of deflationist must concede that much. They will simply respond that abstract objects are so metaphysically cheap that we ought to buy them anyway.

However, there may be reasons why we might want to do without exotic objects altogether, if we can. Views that countenance exotic objects tend to inherit certain puzzles concerning their nature. Russell (1905, pp. 482–483) famously objected to non-existent objects on the grounds that they purportedly end up committing those who believe in them to inconsistencies. There is a large literature concerning how a defender of non-existent objects ought to avoid this pitfall with contributions from authors such as Mally (1914), Parsons (1980), Priest (2005), and Zalta (1983). Quine (1948) objected to merely possible objects on the grounds that they are metaphysically dubious. Defenders of merely possible objects like Lewis (1968) and Priest (2005) have had much to say in response to this charge. There are also puzzles concerning how many of the relevant objects there are, for a discussion of some such puzzles see Nolan (1996) and, Nolan and Sandgren (2014). Brock (2010) has recently launched a powerful attack on creationist approaches to the metaphysics of mythical objects. These are just some of the challenges and hazards that those who appeal to exotic objects face. If we can get away with leaving those exotic objects out of our theories, we could avoid these complications altogether.

When comparing a hybrid transparent theory with a non-transparent theory that employs the very same non-transparent resources but omits the appeal to exotic objects, the latter theory appears to have the advantage of explanatory and ontological simplicity. It is controversial whether we should give much, or any, weight to this sort of consideration when deciding between theories. Authors such as Huemer (2009), Shalkowski (2010), and Willard (2014) raise doubts about whether parsimony and explanatory power should be given weight in metaphysical arguments. However, *if* all else being equal we ought to prefer simpler explanations and theories that are committed to fewer kinds of things, then this would constitute a strike against the hybrid view relative to the corresponding non-transparent view.

Exotic objects do not help explain intentional identity. It may be that countenancing such things is justified for some *other* reason, but if what I have said above is correct, there is one fewer thing that an appeal to exotic objects can help us explain. Arguments like those presented above chip away, bit by bit, at the motivations for countenancing exotic objects. If things continue like this, the costs of countenancing exotic objects may eventually outweigh the benefits they confer.

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