# There are sea-serpents, Jim, but not as we know them

Peter Smith

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## 1 Intro

At the last meeting, Tim Crane gave a talk in which he made play with a distinction between 'believing in' and 'believing that'. And he claimed that this distinction could be put to serious philosophical work of interest to serious metaphysicians. My hunch at the time was that *this* distinction in fact can't bear any real weight. But I can't now reconstruct Tim's own arguments sufficiently to give a fair evaluation of them.

However, Tim did say that the distinction he wanted to draw, and at least some of the work to which he wanted to put the distinction, was grounded in a paper on 'Believing in Things' by Zoltán Szabó. So in this talk, I'll see what we can get out of *that* paper.

And, as far as I can recall Tim's paper, I think it is fair to say the following. If Szabó's distinction is not well made, or doesn't do the sort of work that *he* wants, then those parts of Tim's paper based on a similar distinction are in bad shape too. But with that by way of preamble, I won't I say anything more *directly* about Tim's paper. To repeat: since it is out there, in a worked through published version, I'm going to be looking at Szabó's paper instead.

Don't worry, though, if you haven't read Szabó's paper. I'll give some of the headline news as we go along.

Two apologies before I begin. First, I'm afraid that the talk is unremittingly negative. And second, to almost-quote Pascal, "I made this talk longer than usual because I lacked the time to make it shorter".

## 2 Sea serpents

Szabó starts his paper with a lovely quotation:

> During the last five decades the number of men of solid reputation and standing (including some speaking for commercial and scientific institutions) who are willing to be at least open-minded about the sea serpent has steadily grown. And it is very important to fix in one's mind that these men use the term 'sea serpent' with great reluctance and merely as a label, since this happens to be the established name. None of them is willing to believe in a real 'serpent', that is, in a large marine snake (beyond those sea snakes of the Indian Ocean which are in zoology books and aquaria). They all use 'sea serpent' to mean something in the seas which is in all probability a large animal, undiscovered and unknown, and probably even of mammalian nature.

So let's start with the same story, and first ask

(1) Do those men of solid reputation believe that there are sea-serpents?

A straight, unqualified, 'yes' answer would surely be misleading in many, perhaps most, contexts. By hypothesis, those men *don't* believe that there are real serpents, they don't believe that there are very large marine snakes of an unknown variety.

However, a straight, unqualified, 'no' answer would also be equally misleading in many contexts. By hypothesis, the men of solid reputation aren't total sceptics about the mariners' tales about giant sea creatures. They *do* believe that there something very roughly sea-serpentish out there. They do lend credence to some claims about 'sea-serpents', even if taken with scare quotes and two large pinches of salt.

I guess we might be tempted to get rather contextualist here. But suppose that you do press me to give a snappy summary answer to the question 'Do those men of solid reputation believe that there are sea-serpents?' (an answer apt for a wide range of contexts). What can I say? Well, given that both plain 'yes' and 'no' are misleading, but you are forcing me to keep it short, I'd be rather tempted to say something like: *they believe that there are sea-serpents, but not as such.*

And what about that one of those men of solid reputation, reporting his own views? He can qualify similarly: there are sea-serpents but not as such – or to echo another famous formulation, *There are sea-serpents, Jim, but not as we know them.* Later, we'll revert to considering such qualifications made in direct assertions as opposed to attributions of belief: but for the moment, let's continue to focus on the latter.

Here's another question:

(2) Do those men of solid reputation believe in sea-serpents?

Or at least I say it is 'another question', for it is put in a slightly different form of words from the previous one. But actually it is difficult to see much clear salt water between asking whether our men of reputation believe in sea-serpents and asking whether they believe that there are sea-serpents. *Maybe* we can draw a fine distinction – but let's hang fire on that issue for the moment. For now, let's just consider the natural first reaction to this question.

Well, again, both a straight 'yes' and a straight 'no' seem misleading answers to our second question, and in just the same ways that a straight 'yes' and a straight 'no' are misleading answers to our first question.

And if you press me to give a snappy summary answer to the question 'Do they believe that in sea-serpents?', I'd be similarly tempted to say something like: *they believe in sea-serpents, but not as such.*

Let's now generalize just a bit from this initial example, and draw out three provisional but surely plausible claims:

(i) At least when $F$ is a kind-term like 'sea-serpent', answers to the questions 'Does $A$ believe that there are $F$s?' and 'Does $A$ believe in $F$s?' stand or fall together. Call this *the parity claim.* (Note this is a claim about kind terms. Szabó himself notes and sets aside various cases where $F$ is not a kind term and can't appear in both believes-that-there-are and believes-in contexts: e.g. substitute 'two cups of tea before breakfast' for $F$!)

(ii) In particular, when $A$ is already somewhat distancing himself from fully endorsing talk of $F$s, goes along with such talk only queasily, in a 'scare quotes' kind of way, then we can hardly say straight out that $A$ believes that there are $F$s or believes in $F$s. But equally, suppose he still thinks that there is *something* right in '$F$'-talk. Then an unqualified denial that $A$ believes that there are $F$s or equally an unqualified denial that $A$ believes in $F$s could be misleading too. Parity is maintained in the half-way cases.

(iii) But we are not, it seems, bereft of fairly ordinary ways of describing these half-way cases (where neither a straight 'yes' nor a straight 'no' quite hits the mark). As I've indicated, the 'believing that there are $F$s/believing in $F$s, *but not as such*' locution works for me. Maybe you prefer 'believing that there are $F$s/believing in $F$s, *but not $F$s in the full sense of the word*' or 'believing that there are $F$s/believing in $F$s, *but not $F$s as we stereotypically think of them*' or something like that. I don't want to hang anything on the choice of qualifying locution here. The provisional claim I want to make isn't about the best choice of locution but is this: whether we go for the *not as such* modifier or the *not in the full sense of the word* modifier or something else, it can equally well modify *believing that* there are $F$s and *believing in $F$*'s. Such modifiers carry across. Which is just to continue to maintain the parity claim for the half-way cases too.

Suppose those provisional claims are right and the parity claim is true. Then it looks as if we aren't going to be able to exploit a believing that/believing in distinction for kinds to do any philosophical heavy lifting. So, let's turn to Szabó's arguments and see if the parity claim gets dented.

## 3   Horatio's beliefs

Szabó kicks off his paper by explicitly announcing . . .

> My goal is to challenge the standard picture. I will argue that for some predicates $F$, a fully rational and reflective person might believe that $F$s exist without at the same time believing in $F$s.

And he quickly explains the hoped-for pay-off from challenging the standard picture:

> The pay-off for making the distinction is considerable; it opens up a way of expressing ontological reservations about certain sorts of entities – without thereby denying that there are such things. This in turn provides a new way of understanding central debates in ontology, including debates about the existence of numbers, material objects, or mental states.

The idea is to make room for cases where we do not believe in $F$s even though we believe that there are $F$s. Note though that to get that pay-off, it must be that the 'standard picture' is wrong, not for just some fudged-up examples, but for cases where '$F$' stands in for some kind term for a putatively ontologically kosher sort of thing.

That's why I explicitly set up the parity claim as saying that *when $F$ is a kind term* believing that there are $F$s goes with believing in $F$s. It is *this* claim that needs to be dented if we are going to get the pay-off that Szabó wants.

I'm stressing this point again because Szabó's first illustrative example rather spectacularly does *not* involve a putative kind-term $F$. So by his own lights, it can't support his case. Let me explain.

There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Horatio's philosophy. And Horatio is a modest man. *He* thinks that too. So, we might say (Szabó suggests)

(a) Horatio believes that there are things that Horatio doesn't believe in.

But according to Szabó we wouldn't say

(b) Horatio believes in things that Horatio doesn't believe in.

So here's a case where believing that there are $F$s and believing in $F$s peels apart.

Well, two obvious remark about this. First, maybe I'm cloth-eared and insensitive to nuance, but I'm just not so sure about Szabó's intuitions here. Compare

(a′) Horatio believes that there are things that Horatio doesn't believe that there are.

(b′) Horatio believes in things that Horatio doesn't believe that there are.

I actually don't have too much trouble in hearing those as well as being more or less acceptable descriptions of Horatio's doxastic situation, alongside the supposedly anodyne (a). And then, having primed myself with (a′) and (b′), I find I can hear (b) as reasonably OK too. True, things do rather go in and out of focus here: but for that reason alone I wouldn't want to rest anything on this tricksy sort of example.

But in any case, there's a more serious second point. Even if Szabó were right that in the described circumstances there is a reading of (a) which is definitely fine while any unforced reading of (b) definitely isn't, it remains the case that $F = $ *things that Horatio doesn't believe in* is not a kosher kind term in anyone's book. So the fact that Horatio can believe that there are these $F$s but not believe in $F$'s just doesn't touch the parity claim (which is a claim about kind terms, remember). For all we've shown, we may here just have a superficial quirk of certain double intentional contexts.

# 4   Szabó's analysis

Still, although his remarks about the Horatio example aren't very confidence inspiring, they aren't at all the core of Szabó's case either (they are just intended to play a preliminary softening-up role). His main discussion, the core of his paper, proceeds by offering a parity-breaking *analysis* of the notion of *believing in*. So here, without further ado, skipping the motivational moves en route, is his concluding analysis:

> $A$ consciously believes in $F$s iff $A$ thinks the content $[F$s$]$ and is committed to the representational correctness of $[F$s$]$.

Obviously, I have some explaining to do!

Well, I'm not going to fuss about his focussing on *conscious* belief here. Nor am I particularly going to fuss about Szabó's taking the content of a state of believing-in to be not a *proposition* but a *plural concept* – or as he says, a plural term. The idea is that the term $[F$s$]$ is the sort of thing which is a constituent of a proposition like *F$s$ are cool* or perhaps *There are $Fs$ in the garden*. And then believing-in has such a propositional constituent as its content. Let's accept this for the sake of argument.

I want to focus instead on the core suggestion that believing in $F$'s involves being committed to the representational correctness of $[F$s$]$. What does *that* mean? Szabó tells us:

The representational correctness of [$F$s] entails that $F$s exist and that the conception of $F$s is true.

Obviously, it is the second bit of that – whatever it exactly means – which is going to be doing the parity-breaking work. Suppose being committed to the representational correctness of [$F$s] were *just* a matter of believing that there are $F$s, then parity would be maintained. Believing in $F$'s would go with believing that there are $F$'s. So what is going to do the parity-breaking work for Szabó is his building into the notion of believing in $F$s the additional commitment to the correctness of the *conception* of [$F$s].

So what are we talking about when we talk about the conception of [$F$s]? It is something like Putnam's idea of the *stereotype* associated with '$F$' – that is, it is some package of ideas about $F$'s that those who use the term $F$ with expert competence must possess. So, as Szabó puts it, even if our stereotype is wrong, we are going wrong in virtue of our competence with the term.

But you can immediately see, I hope, that the details here aren't actually going to matter too much. For what is evidently happening is that Szabó is *restricting* his notion of believing-in-$F$'s to cover only believing in $F$s as such (to use the turn of phrase that I found came happily at the outset). So where it initially seemed entirely natural to contrast fully-fledged *believing in $F$s (as such)*, with more queasy, qualified, hedged *believing in $F$s but not as such*, Szabó is insisting on only calling the first of those 'believing-in', when we accept the correctness of the $F$-stereotype, and he is ruling out believing-in-$F$s-but-not-as-such.

Now, Szabó says at the outset that he 'will be using "believing in" as a term of art, but in a way that roughly corresponds to one of its natural English uses'. Well, fair enough. But plainly, just stipulating away the natural idea of believing-in-$F$s-but-not-as-such can't possibly do any serious philosophical work.

Of course, if we do accept Szabó's stipulation, then parity is trivially broken. For suppose we say (1) that believing that there are $F$s comes in various flavours – from full strength, so to speak, which *inter alia* involves making full play with the concept [$F$s] and so acceptance of the stereotypical story about $F$s, through to weaker cases, where we accept that there are $F$s but not as the stereotype says they are. And suppose with Szabó we stipulate that (2) we restrict talk of believing in $F$s so it only applies in full-strength cases where we are committed to the correctness of the stereotype. Well, of course we can have weak belief-that without strong belief-in. But what can that stipulation buy us?

## 5 Regrouping

Let's regroup and think what's going on here.

There are two distinctions hereabouts, believing that vs believing in, and a distinction between full-blooded doxastic states about $F$s, and states which are about $F$s but not as such.

But, to repeat, these distinctions cut across each other. Szabo misguidedly wraps up the idea of believing-in and the idea of a doxastic state being full-blooded (if that's quite the right word) into one single notion, and then contrasts that composite notion with believing-that. However, looking ahead in his paper, it turns out that what is *actually* doing the real contrastive work here is not the believing-in vs believing-that component, but is the distinction between accepting $F$s and accepting $F$s but not as

such. Which is exactly as you'd expect, of course, given the plausibility of the parity thesis.

So I propose now just to stop worrying about Szabó's misguided efforts to try to bleed the distinction he is *really* interested in into a stipulated distinction between believing-in and believing-that. For the rest of this talk, I'll ask instead whether the underlying constrast between full acceptance of *F*s vs accepting *F*s but not as such can do any philosophical work for us.

# 6   Back to ontology

Here's Szabó again. In the light of what I've just said I've slightly tinkered with the passage (so I've killed a few 'that'/'in' contrasts, and added an 'as such' or two).

> So, it looks as if there is a way one might express ontological reservations about *F*s without denying that there are such things. It goes like this: "I have reasons to think that our term is representationally incorrect: there is nothing that [fully] fits our ordinary conception of *F*s. Because of this I don't believe that there *F*s as such. Nevertheless, I do not doubt that there are plenty of true propositions about things picked out as *F*s, and that these entail the proposition that there are *F*s. So, I believe that there are *F*s, though not as such. My beliefs are coherent because I don't assume that our conception of *F*s applies to *F*s."

Which seems plausible enough to me.

But now note the trite but important that representational incorrectness comes in degrees. And to count as believing that there are *F*s though not as such, I'd better not think that the stereotypical conception of *F*s is *too* wildly wrong. Not that I have a story to propose about just how wrong you can be about *F*'s while still counting as believing – by our loose commensensical standards – that there are *F*s, but not as such. But there are limits, I think we all agree.

Think for example why we *wouldn't* want to say that someone who gives a diagnosis of schizophrenia for certain behaviours might for all that believe that there are *people who consort with the devil*, but not as such, or are *witches*, but not as such. And think too why we likewise wouldn't want to say that a modern chemist believes in *phlogiston* but not as such. The 'witches' stereotype and the 'phlogiston' stereotype just get things far *too* wrong. There are limits to charity in interpretation, limits to how far we can continue to use a term while, so to speak, holding our noses.

On the other hand, our mariners who believe that there is a sinuous sea beast are not departing too much from central aspects of the stereotypical serpent (it is a living creature, it is big, it isn't bulky like a whale, and so on). So here, as Szabó himself almost says,

> The honorable gentlemen of the opening quotation who believe that there is something out there on the sea that bears the established name "sea serpent" but who also believe that nothing really fits the seamen's reports could say precisely that they believe that there are sea-serpents, but not as such.

Well, so far, so good. But is the availability of this sort of common-or-garden loose talk about believing-in-*F*s-but-not-as such actually going to help us out, not just when discussing sailors' tall tales in the Eight Bells, but in the metaphysics seminar?

Here's Szabó's key example:

> Nominalists have all sorts of arguments to the effect that the ordinary [Platonist] conception of numbers is false: if there were things which fit this conception, we couldn't refer to them, we couldn't have justified and/or reliable beliefs about them, etc. Suppose one of the nominalist arguments is sound. Still, we need not jump to the conclusion that there are no numbers. Certainly, we would be entitled to say that nothing fits our conception of numbers – but perhaps numbers themselves don't fit that conception either. Given the strength of our convictions that the proposition that $2 + 4 = 4$ is true and that its truth entails that there are numbers, this seems preferable to the nominalist's view.

What is 'this' in the last sentence? I take it that Szabó means that it is preferable to say that there are numbers, but not as such, rather than officially deny outright that there are numbers as a nominalist does. (But if that's right, note then that we are actually no longer here talking about modified belief ascriptions, but about modified assertions. So issues about believing in/believing that have dropped out of the picture anyway. It is the idea that we can use 'not as such' modifiers to state an ontological position here that is at stake.)

Well, suppose (just for the sake of the present argument) that I *do* accept the nominalist claim that our ordinary concept of numbers is indeed deeply platonist. And suppose I *do* accept one of those nominalist arguments about the coherence of the very idea of referring to or knowing about objects of a platonist kind. Then, in effect, Szabó is suggesting that there are still *two* positions I could end up in.

The first is full-strength Harvard nominalism. It is strictly speaking false that numbers exists and hence strictly speaking false that $2 + 4 = 4$. Of course, as a nominalist, I then owe you an account how come we mistakenly think $2 + 4 = 4$ is true, how come the falsehoods of applied mathematics are useful, and so on and so forth. And of course modern fictionalist nominalists offer us just such accounts. There aren't really numbers, they say, but only according to the arithmetical fiction. Two and two is not really four, but only according to the arithmetical fiction. And so on. I'm not saying that these are the beginnings of good accounts; but at least the nominalist makes the effort.

But Szabó is trying to make room for a second position. Supposedly, I can accept that our ordinary conception of numbers is platonist and accept that platonism is in trouble, but I can get off the bus before the nominalist terminus and say instead that there *are* numbers, but not as such. There are numbers, but not as the platonist stereotype would have them to be.

But hold on. Given that, by hypothesis, I do accept the basic nominalist arguments, I still think the claim that there are numbers is not just mistaken, but is *badly* mistaken. The stereotype of numbers as platonistic entities is hopeless wrong. According to me, someone who really believes that there are numbers as such is barking up completely the wrong tree, just as the believer in witches or in phlogiston was getting things hopelessly wrong. Indeed, if anything, you might think that the mistake by someone who believes in numbers is even worse – according to the nominalist arguments, we've no reason to suppose that there is *anything* there of the right ontological category.

So this isn't like the sea-serpent case at all. The thought in that case was that there really was a something in the right ontological ball-park (so to speak): a real living creature in the sea, large and sinuous and so-on. It just isn't a serpent properly so called. But in the present case, *if* (and it's a big if) it is right both that our ordinary

concept of numbers is deeply platonist and that the whole idea of such objects is highly problematic, then number talk construed strictly is *horribly* wrong.

But then, what on earth would I be saying if I try to follow Szabó's offered way out and say that there are numbers but not as such (not as the platonist stereotype would have them to be). Allowing a bit of loose talk here just isn't going to be enough to rescue the situation. It isn't that there are numbers but not quite as the received conception of numbers would have it. For someone who accepts the nominalist arguments, there isn't anything remotely like the platonistically conceived numbers (any more that there is anything like phlogiston). So the mistake is just too big for someone who accepts the nominalist arguments still to be able to say that there are numbers but not as such. It is the same as with the phlogiston case: the phlogiston theorists mistake is too big for us to be able usefully to say that there is phlogiston but not as such.

So the situation is this. Either the nominalist is wrong that our everyday conception of the numbers is platonist and/or wrong that that conception is problematic – in which case we don't need to invoke Szabó's way out: pending other arguments, we can just take it as true that there are numbers (without queasy qualification). Or the nominalist is right that our everyday conception of the numbers is platonist and right that that conception is problematic. In which case believing that there are numbers as such is going very badly wrong; and we aren't going to rescue the situation by a bit of hedging loose talk, saying that there are numbers, Jim, but not as we know them. For it is entirely unclear what that can mean (any more than it is clear what it could mean to say that there is phlogiston, Jim, but not as we know it). The wheels of language would be turning, but no gear is yet engaged.

# 7    Conclusion

So where have we got to?

I've argued that Szabó mixes together in an unhappy way two distinctions, the binary believing that/believing in distinction, and a more shaded distinction between accepting *F*'s as such and hedged acceptance of *F*s but not as such. It's because he's mixed in the useful second distinction into his account of believing-in that he thinks that notion can do useful work. But clarity is best served if we insist on separating out the active ingredient of the mix.

So can the active ingredient dissolve some tangles in metaphysics? Can the idea of believing in *F*s but not as such do serious work in metaphysical discussions? We looked just at what Szabó says about nominalism. And we saw that what he says doesn't work. I think the point probably generalizes. Ontological issues are, so to speak, big issues. Ontological mistakes are big mistakes. And we can't rescue ourselves from such mistakes by a bit of hedging loose talk.