

John RYDER / Джон РАЙДЕР

| The Ontology of Santa Claus: Miracle on 34th Street |

John RYDER / Джон РАЙДЕР

USA, New York
Rector of Khazar University.
Baku, Azerbaijan.США, Нью-Йорк.
Хазарский университет. Баку, Азербайджан.
Президент. Доктор философских наук.jryder@khazar.org

THE ONTOLOGY OF SANTA CLAUS: *MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET*

The 1947 film *Miracle on 34th Street* is an iconic American film associated with the Christmas season. It tells the story of a man who claims to be the 'real' Santa Claus, and the process by which he comes to be recognized as such by otherwise normal and rational people. On the perfectly reasonable assumption that Santa Claus does not exist, the film is simply a pleasant fantasy with strong associations with American culture. However, the case that the film makes for the reality of Santa Claus is unusually clever, and oddly compelling. In this paper, we consider the ontological issues raised by the film. More specifically, we bring to bear philosophical insights developed within the American Naturalist tradition to demonstrate that indeed, there really is a Santa Claus.

Key words: *ontology, Santa Claus, epistemology, belief, fictional characters, ordinality*

Онтология Санта Клауса: «Чудо на 34-й улице»

«Чудо на 34-й улице» — классический американский рождественский фильм. В фильме рассказывается история человека, объявившего себя Санта-Клаусом, и судебного разбирательства, результатом которого явилось признание его Санта-Клаусом вполне нормальными здравомыслящими людьми. Фильм — милая сказка, если считать Санта-Клауса выдумкой. Однако поднятый в фильме вопрос о статусе Санта-Клауса и его решение оказываются неожиданно глубокими и интересными. В статье рассматриваются онтологические вопросы, которые ставит фильм. Более того, привлечение философии американского натурализма помогает доказать реальность существования Санта-Клауса.

Ключевые слова: *онтология, Санта-Клаус, эпистемология, вера, фикциональный характер, порядок*

In the early summer of 1947 *Miracle on 34th Street* premiered in New York City. It became, and to this day remains, one of the most iconic of American films. The reasons it has assumed this status are varied, and they no doubt shed some light on aspects of American culture and character. The film takes place during the Christmas season, and thus it has become associated with Christmas and is frequently broadcast each year in December, much as for example *Ironiya Sud*'by is associated with and broadcast at the New Year in Russia. On the most overt and obvious level it is a story that appeals to values and ideals that resonate among Americans, such as the importance of belief and the power of innocence. As we will see, some reviewers of the film have also described its plot as a retelling of the passion of Jesus Christ, and so the film has a strong audience among devout Christians as well as many others. Philosophically, the film takes up the epistemological question of the nature, value, and justification of belief; and of greatest interest for us here, it offers a foray into ontology by making a fascinating and compelling case for the existence of Santa Claus! Our primary interest will be to see how this is done and to consider some of the ontological issues involved.

The Film

First, however, some background and a plot summary are in order. The story begins on Thanksgiving Day, which in the U.S. is typically the fourth Thursday of November. Thanksgiving is one of the most important national holidays in the U.S. It purports to have its roots in an event in 1621 in the Plymouth Colony in New England, peopled by Calvinist Christian separatists from England who called themselves Pilgrims. The event was a dinner in which the Pilgrims "gave thanks" for the harvest, and to which they invited local native people who had helped them. Today Thanksgiving is typically a family holiday and revolves around an elaborate meal with a number of traditional dishes.

In addition to family and food, since 1924 Thanksgiving Day is associated with a parade in midtown Manhattan sponsored by the Macy's Department Store. The main Macy's store is on Herald Square, where Broadway, 6th Avenue, and 34th Street converge, and the parade ends there with marching bands, dancers, and singers from the parade performing in front of the store. The parade is broadcast across the country on television, and organizers estimate that in our time some 50 million people watch some or all of the



John RYDER / Джон РАЙДЕР

| The Ontology of Santa Claus: Miracle on 34th Street |

parade on television. The parade route itself is typically lined with 3.5 million people. The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade is, in other words, a nationally central ingredient of one of the most important national holidays. Furthermore, traditionally the final float in the parade is an elaborate sleigh with Santa Claus riding on top, and it is generally said that when Santa Claus reaches the end of the parade at Herald Square the Christmas season has officially begun.

Miracle on 34th Street begins with the Macy's parade, thus the '34th Street' of the title. Though the year is, presumably, 1946 (the film premiered in June 1947), the parade had already become an important component of the holiday, and the Macy's store was famous across the country. One of the film's central characters, Doris, is an employee of Macy's and is responsible for organizing the parade. She learns to her horror, and at the last minute, that the man hired to play Santa Claus on the final float is drunk. Doris asks the man who informed her of this fact, and who himself looks like Santa Claus, if he might fill in. Having had some experience he is persuaded, and Doris hires him on the spot. He gives his name as Kris Kringle and, crucial to the plot of the film, he later claims to be the real Santa Claus. Kris does such a marvelous job as Santa Claus in the parade that Macy's offers him a position playing Santa Claus in the store. This is also an American tradition that continues today, wherein small children will be brought to a store, or now to a shopping mall, to sit on the lap of Santa Claus. Santa will ask them whether they have been good children during the year, and they will tell Santa what presents they would like for Christmas. Kris was given this position at Macy's.

One of the film's central topics is the question of the proper place of belief, particularly belief in the patently unreasonable. The theme is expressed through the relation of Doris and her six year old daughter Susan. Doris, who is a single mother and an aspiring professional, is a confirmed realist who has little patience for flights of fancy and imagination. She has made it clear to Susan that Santa Claus is a fictional character, and so Susan keeps her emotional distance from Kris and at first is not drawn into any aspect of the Santa Claus fantasy. American audiences then and now are likely to find Doris' insistence on her daughter's realism to be unfortunate because childhood is taken to be a time during which such fantasy is appropriate. Kris Kringle certainly takes this view. Doris' neighbor Fred, an attorney, has the same response, and he is torn between respecting Doris' rights as a parent to raise her daughter as she chooses and his desire to support the child's presumed entitlement to a childhood rich in fantasy. He is also a single man who is romantically attracted to Doris.

Another of the film's central topics is the appropriate 'meaning' of the Christmas holiday. It should be pointed out that the Christmas season and holiday, even by 1946, had taken on a highly commercial character. By today the holiday is predominantly an occasion for everyone to give gifts to nearly everyone they know. Even workplaces will have parties in which one or another mechanism is used through which co-workers give gifts to one another. Christmas has in fact become so much a matter of buying and giving gifts that today the U.S. retail industry in general depends for its annual profitability on sales during the Christmas season. One of the aspects of the character of Kris Kringle in the film, one to which audiences in the film's time and today are attracted, is that he decries the commercialization of Christmas. This is a holiday that in

American cultural mythology is supposed to be profound. Of course the overt occasion for Christmas is the birth of Jesus, but there are other, secular values that the holiday is also supposed to celebrate: goodwill, peace, friendship, generosity, family, and similar virtues. So even while often happily going into debt to pay for all the gifts they are buying, Americans will say, presumably without irony, that the "true meaning" of Christmas has been lost. Kris Kringle was also saying this, even in his capacity as a 'department store Santa', which is to say as a player in the very commercialization process he bemoaned. One can imagine that Macy's owner and managers would find this somewhat disconcerting.

There were other features of Kris's behavior that they also found disturbing. For example, Kris defies one of the fundamental principles of retail commerce by suggesting to a child and parents a gift that Macy's did not sell but that could be purchased at Macy's chief competitor. The store managers were horrified by this, though very quickly the store was receiving feedback from customers who were delighted that Macy's was demonstrating such a refreshing consideration for the customers' interests. The owner of the store realized that this unusual policy was in fact good business, and so supported Kris. The store psychologist remained suspicious.

The psychologist becomes convinced that Kris is mentally disturbed, and quite possibly dangerous, as a result of Kris' unusual actions and his insistence that he is in fact Santa Claus. At this point things go badly for Kris. He is removed from his position as Macy's 'store Santa', and eventually he is recommended for permanent commitment to a facility for the mentally ill. Fred, who has befriended Kris, convinces him to fight the commitment, and Kris agrees to allow Fred to arrange a formal hearing before the New York State Supreme Court to determine his mental condition. The State of New York in the person of its District Attorney (DA), allying itself with the store psychologist, argues that he is insane because he claims, and presumably believes, that he is Santa Claus. The logic of course is that everyone knows that Santa Claus does not exist, so anyone who genuinely believes himself to be Santa Claus must be mentally unstable. Fred, who at this point is not only Kris' friend but also Doris' suitor, represents Kris at the hearing, and he decides to use the unusual tactic of defending Kris' sanity by demonstrating that he is in fact Santa Claus, or to put it more carefully, by demonstrating both that Santa Claus does exist and that Kris Kringle is in fact the real Santa Claus. If he can successfully demonstrate these points then not only is Kris Kringle exonerated, but Doris' hard, realist's heart will be softened and Susan will be returned the appropriate childhood entitlement to believe in Santa Claus.

The court proceeding is the climax of the film, and the details are important for the philosophical points to be made later. First, Fred has the clever idea to arrange for extensive publicity for the hearing, and quickly the city is aware that Santa Claus has legal problems. The judge of the hearing appears to be an ogre, and even his grandchildren turn against him for putting Santa Claus "on trial". The DA is accused even by his wife of "persecuting" Santa Claus. When Fred announces his intention to prove that Santa Claus exists and that Kris is he, the DA asks the judge simply to rule that Santa Claus does not exist. The judge, however, is advised by a political counselor that it would be unwise politically to be publicly identified as the judge who legally ruled Santa Claus out of existence. Not knowing what to do, the judge stalls for time by agreeing to hear



John RYDER / Джон РАЙДЕР

| The Ontology of Santa Claus: Miracle on 34 th Street |

evidence from the attorneys. At this point the DA calls the storeowner R. H. Macy to the stand (never mind the fact that the historical R. H. Macy died in 1877), and asks him under oath whether he believes that Kris is Santa Claus. The adult in Mr. Macy is about to say “of course not”, but then he recalls the smiling faces of the children in his store, and of course he also recalls his commercial need to keep those children and their parents happy. He says that he does believe Kris to be the real Santa Claus. Fred then calls the DA’s own young son to the stand and the boy tells the court that his father has assured him that Santa Claus exists and that of course his father would never lie to him.

It is instructive to pause and see what has happened here because we will return to it. Specifically, three powerful sets of social relations have been identified in which there is very good reason to assert the existence of Santa Claus: family, politics, and commerce. The pressure on the judge from his grandchildren, and on the District Attorney from his wife and from the innocence of his young son, all point to the desirability of acknowledging the existence of Santa Claus. Furthermore, in the U.S. many judges are elected to their positions, so their careers are very much political. The judge of the hearing is convinced that public opinion will be most displeased by a denial of the existence of Santa Claus that has the force of legal ruling, and the public’s likely political expression will be damaging to the judge. And Mr. Macy knows well that the commercial success of his store at Christmas time needs Santa Claus, and given the importance of commercial values for himself and all his employees, the last thing he should do is deny the existence of Santa Claus.

Of course one may acknowledge the impact of family, politics, and commerce on custom, but deny that the force of custom or mass culture has any implications for ontology. This is the very question to which we will return.

But the coup de grace is still to come. The DA was compelled to stipulate that Santa Claus exists by the insistence of his son that he has told his son that Santa Claus exists and that he would never lie. But he then challenges Fred to demonstrate that Kris Kringle is that very Santa Claus, as Kris has claimed, and to do so on the basis of a proper, competent authority. Meanwhile Susan has become an ally of Kris and she writes him a letter, addressed to Santa Claus at the New York State Supreme Court. It is common in the U.S. for children to write letters to Santa Claus in the weeks leading up to Christmas assuring him of their virtue and expressing their wishes. The U.S. Postal Service receives many thousands of such letters every year. In the case of Susan’s letter, an alert employee of the Postal Service notices that it is addressed to Santa Claus at the Supreme Court, and he realizes that he can dispose of the other 50,000 letters addressed to Santa Claus that he has been holding the same way. Susan’s letter and a couple others reach Kris at the court, and Fred realizes that he has found his “competent authority”. Fred points out to the judge that even the U.S. Postal Service acknowledges Kris to be the real Santa Claus, and that there can be no more “competent authority” than the national State itself. The judge asks for additional evidence, at which point postal workers deliver to Kris at the court 21 large sacks of mail that hold the 50,000 letters addressed to Santa Claus. Faced with the full weight of familial social relations, political relations, commercial relations, and now the judgment of the State through its public postal service, the judge has no choice but to exonerate Kris of any allegations of mental illness and revoke the

order of commitment to the mental hospital, thereby implicitly recognizing Kris Kringle to be the real Santa Claus, as Kris had claimed all along.

This being Hollywood, there has to be a romantic and idealistic denouement. Fred had quit his job at a law firm in order to defend Kris in court, and Doris had criticized his idealism in so doing. With Kris’ and Fred’s victory in court Doris finds, or reclaims, her own idealism, and along the way falls in love with Fred. Earlier in the film *Susan*, being an American child of the time, tells Kris that she wishes for a proper family and for their own little house. Recall that this is 1946–1947, precisely the time in post-war America that many one-family housing tracts were beginning to be built, the most well-known of which were called Levittown after their builder, William Levitt. The suburbs were beginning to explode, and many thousands of young American families, most of them with veterans recently returned from the war, were leaving the cities and moving to the new suburbs. I myself grew up in such a place a few years later, and Susan wished for the same. The next morning, Christmas morning in fact, at Kris’ suggestion Fred, Doris, and Susan drive to a specific spot in the suburbs where they discover a house, identical to a picture Susan had earlier shown to Kris, with a “for sale” sign. A miracle indeed.

The Reviews

Before moving on to philosophical matters we may say a word or two about the film’s reception. It was well reviewed from the start, for example in *The New York Times*, and it continues to receive praise.¹ The reviewer for the *Times* does not mention it, but a number of others have suggested that the story of Kris Kringle parallels the story of Jesus in the week prior to his death. This point of view is especially common among, though not unique to, overtly Christian reviewers.² It is worthwhile to dwell for a moment on the parallels with Jesus. Whether the authors of the story, who also wrote the screenplay, had Jesus in mind we do not know, but the common points are fairly obvious. Kris, like Jesus, represents innocence, virtue, and idealism. Jesus and Kris enter their respective towns amid much fanfare, and during their popularity they are critical of the prevailing mores of the people, criticizing the “money-changers” and in Kris’ case criticizing the commercialization of Christmas and even attacking the cynic in the person of the store psychologist, whom he hits over the head with an umbrella. And both claim to be something that anyone might find suspicious, the son of God in one case and Santa Claus in the other. Soon people turn against them and they find themselves “on trial” before the State authorities. For the New York judge, as for Pilate, this was not a good court case over which to preside, especially for political reasons. The important difference of course is that Pilate washed his hands of the matter and left Jesus to the mercy of his enemies, while in New York the judge is compelled by the force of evidence and social pressure to rule in

¹ Review by Bosley Crowther, June 5, 1947, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=EE05E7DF1738E26EBC4D53DFB066838C659EDE>, accessed on 4 May, 2012.

² See for example <http://www.pluggedin.com/videos/1999/q1/miracle-on34thstreet.aspx>, a review by the Christian organization Focus on the Family, accessed 4 May 2012. Another recent review from a secular source makes the same point: <http://www.dvdplanet.com/details.cfm/info/FXD038172/miracle-on-34-th-street-2-discs->, accessed on 4 May 2012.



John RYDER / Джон РАЙДЕР

| The Ontology of Santa Claus: Miracle on 34th Street |

Kris' favor. Perhaps, as some have suggested, we see in the film evidence of a post-war hopefulness in the American psyche.

The parallel with Jesus, even if not thorough, does suggest a prevailing religious theme in the film, specifically concerning the nature and legitimacy of faith. Susan does not believe in Santa Claus, and the film poses the question whether or not it is appropriate for her, for that matter for all of us, to believe? At this more general level of course the issue is not belief in Santa Claus specifically but in the values and virtues Santa Claus represents: generosity, decency, innocence, and a commitment to ideals, to possibilities over actualities. The contrast as the film poses it, and as many may see it, is between the values Santa Claus represents on the one hand and a hard-nosed, pitiless, cynical, and perhaps more commercially inflected approach to the world, represented in the film to some extent by Doris, by Mr. Macy, and in the extreme by the store psychologist. One might of course give a psychological answer to such a question, and say for example that it is more satisfying to believe in such values, perhaps because more comforting, than not. But the film does not approach the question this way. So we are led not to psychological platitudes but to more interesting philosophical issues, both epistemological and ontological.

The Epistemology

The question of the nature and justification of belief brings us into the realm of epistemology. We are asked whether we should believe in Santa Claus. Susan has been disabused of this belief by her mother, who thinks that neither children nor the rest of us should be encouraged to live in delusion. From a realistic point of view the idea of Santa Claus is implausible on the face of it, and presumably we ought not to believe in the implausible, or to put it a slightly different way, as a general principle we ought not to believe in something if there is not sufficient evidence to do so. Through various plot devices, though, Susan finds herself wanting to believe in both Santa Claus and in the hopefulness that he represents. So we may now ask the question in a slightly different way: is Susan, or any of us, ever entitled intellectually to believe in something for which there is not sufficient evidence?

This is the very question the American philosopher William James asked himself in the late 19th century in one of his most well-known and important essays, "The Will to Believe".³ The film poses the question about Santa Claus and certain values, and it may have meant to point the question also to belief in God. In James' case there is no question that he had God in mind. He knew perfectly well that there was insufficient evidence for belief in a creator and redeemer God, but like Susan, James wanted to believe. He was however a scientist, and a very good one. As a scientist he understood that it is a principle of intellectual engagement that we withhold assent to any view or proposition until there is sufficient evidence for it. On scientific grounds, then, we are intellectually bound to withhold belief in God so long as there is inadequate evidence. But still James wanted to believe, and he found himself pushed to ask the question whether there might be any justification for believing in something, in this case God, in the absence of sufficient evidence?

³ William James, "The Will to Believe", in William James: Writings 1878-1899: Psychology, Briefer Course / The Will to Believe / Talks to Teachers and Students / Essays, New York, NY: Library of America, 1992.

I bring up James in this context in part to indicate that the question the film poses is not a silly one, and that it indeed has a rather respectable pedigree. How does James answer his own question? Basically James argues that it is possible for there to be cases in which it is justifiable to believe in that for which there is not sufficient evidence. Such cases must, however, meet three criteria. First, the object of belief must be a live possibility, something that is genuinely possible for one to believe. Second, the possibility of belief must be forced, which is to say that there is no option of withholding belief or assent because to do so would be equivalent to choosing not to believe. Third, the choice must be momentous, by which James means that it cannot be a trivial or unimportant matter, but one for which the choice to believe or not has important implications for one's life. The upshot of James' argument is that when faced with the possibility of belief in some object or proposition for which all three conditions apply, it is intellectually legitimate for one to choose to believe in the absence of sufficient evidence for the truth of the proposition or reality of the object of belief.

It is the exceptional case in which one is confronted with the possibility of belief in something that meets all three conditions. For James, belief in God is one such possibility and he has made a case for the reasonableness of belief in God. Importantly, he has not made a case, nor has he tried, for the claim that there is sufficient evidence to infer the existence of God, or that it is desirable to believe in God, or that anyone else should make the choice that he does. He is simply interested in demonstrating that it is intellectually legitimate to do so in this case if one so chooses. *Miracle on 34th Street* proposes something similar for Santa Claus and an associated set of values, with two important differences. First, the film goes further than James in suggesting that the appropriateness of believing in Santa Claus applies to all of us, and second, the film suggests not simply that we may believe but that we ought to believe, or at least that it is good to believe. Of course the most important difference between the film and James' argument is that the possibility of believing in Santa Claus does not meet all of James' three conditions. Even if it is forced in the sense that not choosing to believe is equivalent to choosing not to believe, for adults it is neither a live option nor is it momentous. It may be alive and momentous for children, but it is not for the rest of us.

The point is that though some reviewers have suggested that the film is a fairly serious statement of the value and importance of faith, its case does not work in any philosophical sense. There may be adequate psychological, social, or familial reasons for children to believe in Santa Claus, but that is not much of a serious illustration of the general importance of faith. However, it is interesting that the film is not content with pointing to some vague rationale for belief or faith, but it advances the even more challenging claim that Santa Claus in fact exists. Now we enter the area of ontology, and we will take up the question of what it might mean to say that Santa Claus exists and what if anything instructive the film has to say on the point.

The Ontology

So the question is whether Santa Claus exists. The answer we all give, as a matter of course and without much concern about it, is "no". But the film's special charm comes from the fact that its climax is an elaborate argument to the effect that Santa Claus does exist.



John RYDER / Джон РАЙДЕР

| The Ontology of Santa Claus: Miracle on 34 th Street |

Our question is this: is this element of the film, admittedly the crucial element for the film to work emotionally, a fun bit of cinematic silliness for which the audience's suspension of disbelief serves up a heart-warming Christmas-time experience, or is there something far more interesting philosophically in the film's argument that Santa Claus exists? In the rest of the paper I would like to say that the latter is the case.

John Herman Randall, Jr., a philosopher who was prominent at Columbia University in the middle decades of the 20th century, once said that "The significant question is, not whether anything is 'real' or not, but how and in what sense it is real, and how it is related to and functions among other reals."⁴ In saying this Randall proposes to shift the ontological debate in two important ways. First, he suggests that existing or not, being real or not, with respect to any given entity is not a relevant question. If we find ourselves engaged with an entity in any way at all its existence is thereby established. In this sense, however, "existence" means both more and less than it usually does. To say that something exists simply in so far as we are engaged somehow with it says little more than that we are engaged with it. For a fuller meaning and understanding of the entity we must go on, as Randall says, to consider "how and in what sense" it exists. This then becomes the ontological enterprise. Second, Randall builds relationality into the notion of existence and into an understanding of what it is for any given entity to exist. Randall's proposal is, in fact, a radical reshaping of the idea of existence or reality and of the enterprise of ontology.

Justus Buchler, a younger colleague of Randall at Columbia, took up this challenge and developed a full-blown systematic ontology to flesh out the meaning of a relational reality.⁵ To understand any entity of any kind as relational means that any entity has two basic features, first that it is itself an identifiable complex or order of traits in relation to one another, and second that it is itself a constituent trait of any number of other complexes or orders. Any entity both "locates" traits and is a trait "located in" or "prevalent in" another order or orders. On this view, to exist, to be real, means to be an order of relations and to prevail in some order or orders of relations.

It is important to see that this description of what it means to exist or to be real applies to any and all sorts of entities: physical objects, organic beings, mathematical entities, dreams, consciousness, fictional characters, ethical principles, delusions, possibilities, histories, and any other sort of entity that one might identify or discriminate. Furthermore, if to exist or to be real is to prevail in some order of relations, then it makes no difference in which order or orders of relations an entity prevails, that is it makes no difference with respect to its reality. In other words, no order is "more real" than any other, and it becomes meaningless to declare any order to be "unreal". An order, to be identifiable as the order it is, has its own integrity, its own identity, and that is sufficient for it to be real, or to be said to exist.

⁴ John Herman Randall, Jr., *Nature and Historical Experience*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1962.

⁵ See Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1966. I present a more extensive case for the plausibility and value of this sort of relational ontology in John Ryder, *The Things in Heaven and Earth: An Essay in Pragmatic Naturalism*, New York: NY, Fordham University Press, forthcoming.

An illustration or two may help to clarify the general idea. We have said that any entity, any complex, both locates traits and is a trait located; it is both the order of which other complexes are constituent and it is a constituent of, it is prevalent in, other orders. Consider a physical object, for example a house. The house as an order locates constituent traits, some of which are parts, though not all are. The materials of which the house is made are parts of the house, and they are constituent traits. Other traits, for example the family that lives in the house, are in no sense parts of the house, though they are very much constituent. To some degree the house is the house that it is because this family and not other people live there. The family, we may say, is a condition of the integrity, and the identity, of the house, and to that extent it is constituent. All complexes that prevail in an order are relevant to that order's integrity and identity, though they will be more or less relevant. The family that lives in a house might be very highly relevant to the house' identity, whereas a specific splinter of wood in its frame is probably minimally relevant.

A complex also prevails in more comprehensive orders, and such "ordinal locations" also contribute to its integrity and identity. The house is likely to be located in a neighborhood of some kind. In that respect it is a complex constituent of the neighborhood and its location in the order that is its neighborhood is also a trait of the house. It would in some more or less relevant respects be a different house if were in a different neighborhood. Or perhaps a house is in no neighborhood, but stands alone on an open prairie, in which case its location as a constituent trait of the prairie is among its traits; the house in this case is relevant to the prairie, more or less depending on details, and the prairie is relevant to the house, again more or less.

Complexes also have functional locations, which is to say that a complex may enter into an order of relations and play some role. There is, for example, a specific Victorian house that was used in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, and the house became emblematic of the film; it took on a new trait by virtue of its role in the order of relations that is the film. We should also note that a complex may have different, even contradictory traits from one ordinal location to another. In the order of physical objects a house retains its size from moment to moment, but in the visual order the house becomes smaller as one moves away from it, or larger as one moves toward it. Similarly in the order of our solar system the earth revolves around the sun, but in the order of ordinary day to day experience the sun revolves around the earth. Or again, in the order of Euclidean geometry parallel lines remain parallel to infinity, but in the visual order they converge in the distance. And with respect to the solar system, our day to day experience, Euclidean geometry, and human vision, no one order is any "more real" than another.

Any complex of any kind can be used to illustrate these and other characteristics of entities that are understood ordinally. A human being is a complex that both locates traits and is a trait located in broader orders, and a person's integrity and identity are the result of both. A person has physical traits and body parts, and it has ideas, emotions, memories, and other sorts of traits all of which contribute to her general identity. No one of these traits is the person more than the others, though again, any one trait may be more relevant in some respects than others. A person's products are also among her



John RYDER / Джон РАЙДЕР

| The Ontology of Santa Claus: Miracle on 34th Street |

traits, for example if she composes a song or writes a story or makes a film. Like the house, a person is also ordinally located. She lives in this or that place, she engages with this or that set of people, she assumes various sets of social functions and relations. These are all orders in which the person as complex prevails.

We may make comparable observations about non-material complexes. A mathematical formula for example has constituent parts, it has a background in mathematical and perhaps other fields, it may develop a history of its own, and it may perform any number of valuable functions. Similarly for a moral principle, or a philosophical idea. Being material or non-material has no bearing on an entity's ordinal character. And recall that once we say that no order has any "more" reality than any other, or that no one order is "really" real and others are not, we no longer have reason to consign some entities to non-reality, nor can we reasonably say that this entity with which we engage exists but that entity with which we engage differently does not.

Consider now what this general point means for the reality of fictional characters. A character in a novel is a constituent, more or less important, of an order of relations that is the novel. It has some traits and not others, and therefore it has an identifiable integrity. We know, for example, what characterizes James Bond, the agency for which he works, the nation of which he is a citizen, his favorite car, how he likes his martinis, and his typical behavior with women. James Bond is what he is and not someone else. We would be surprised, for example, to discover that he really did not achieve his high grades at university but instead cheated; we would be shocked if we were to learn that throughout the Cold War he was really a double-agent working for the Kremlin. The reason we would be shocked is that it would be inconsistent with everything we know about James Bond. The stories in which Bond figures are fully orders of relations. When we engage with a character and its story we are not "suspending belief" as much as entering into the order of relations that is the story. We accept the "world" as provided, and as what it is, and when we value being able to inhabit such a world we do so at times for the sheer pleasure it brings and at times for the insights it engenders. We may even at times prefer some fictional worlds to that of quotidian experience. Such an attitude may or may not suggest psychological disorder, but we are able to do so because of the details of "how and in what sense" the fictional orders and their characters are real.

Thus the question we may reasonably ask about James Bond or about any fictional character is, to return to Randall, not whether he is real or not, but how and in what sense he is real. If he were not real we would not be able to engage him at all, and what confers on him his reality is that James Bond, like any other complex of any kind, prevails in specific orders of relations. He is a character created by Ian Fleming; he is the central character of many books, each of which is its own order of relations; he is also the central character of many films, and they too are all orders of relations. James Bond and all fictional characters exist like any other complex, and for precisely the same reasons: they both locate traits and they prevail in other orders of relations. Furthermore, as we have said concerning all complexes, they do not exist any less than other complexes, nor do they exist any more. They have just the integrity that they have, the same that can be said for any complex of any kind.

The Existence of Santa Claus

Now we may return to Santa Claus. The philosophical charm of *Miracle on 34th Street* is that it makes a coherent, and I would say compelling, ordinal argument for the existence of Santa Claus. The film identifies orders of relations for which the characters are compelled to acknowledge Santa Claus as a constituent complex, and the film works because it illustrates why the characters feel themselves compelled to recognize the reality of Santa Claus. Furthermore, because the orders of fiction and non-fiction typically intersect in a number of ways, we as viewers of the film can understand the characters' behavior because we too tend to inhabit those orders.

Four orders of relations have been identified in which Santa Claus quite naturally prevails: family, politics, commerce, and the State. With respect to family, American parents will typically tell their children that Santa Claus is real, and they would resist pressures to disabuse their children of that belief while the children are still very young. The only question parents would typically ask themselves is at what age the child should be told that Santa Claus is a fiction. As often as not children learn that fact from a friend, at which point some more or less serious drama ensues. The centrality of Santa Claus between parents and their young children in the context of Christmas is the reason the judge's grandchildren are upset with him and even the DA's wife is distressed. And of course the DA's son is the clincher. These are real familial relations, and Santa Claus is in fact a powerful ingredient in those relations, at least in the context of Christmas mythology. In the order of family relations at Christmastime the existence of Santa Claus is not up for discussion, indeed any effort to show disrespect for Santa Claus is promptly met with disfavor.

When the judge is warned by his political advisor not to rule that Santa Claus does not exist we know without question that he is receiving good political advice. The political order is no less powerful than the familial, and an American watching *Miracle* understands without question that it would be politically damaging for the judge if he were to become known as someone who "attacked" Santa Claus as a matter of law. For the judge to do so would be to brand himself insensitive to important cultural commitments, and that could certainly be a factor in voters' reactions to him the next time he runs for office. The cultural aspects of Christmas for Americans, including the role played by Santa Claus, are as real as any other potential factor in the political realm. To say that Santa Claus does not exist or is not real is to deny serious political factors the consequences of which are not difficult to imagine. Of course, in the political order, Santa Claus is real.

The situation is no less clear in the market place. A Christmas season without Santa Claus, in America in any case, is unimaginable. Retail stores, as we have pointed out, rely heavily on sales during Christmastime for their overall financial health. In such a situation they for very good reasons cannot reject the importance of the symbols and characters of the season. All of it helps them, presumably, to sell goods, and that is what they want. And given the importance of retail in a consumer oriented culture, there is no question that the commercial order can be expected to play a powerful role in people's lives. If in such an order characters like Santa Claus play a significant role, then there is no sense at all in deny their existence or reality. If Santa Claus brings children and their parents into stores or shopping malls, and if that traffic results in more sales,



John RYDER / Джон РАЙДЕР

| The Ontology of Santa Claus: Miracle on 34 th Street |

then little more is needed to affirm the reality of Santa Claus. After all, children are not coming to visit the man who is playing the role of Santa Claus; they are coming to see Santa Claus. And as Mr. Macy demonstrates, commercial interests are strong enough for him to testify in court and under oath that he believes Santa Claus is real.

Indeed Santa Claus is so much a central feature of Christmas-time in America that even the State is prepared to support his reality. In fact not only does the U.S. Postal Service underwrite the reality of Santa Claus, but even the Supreme Court of the State of New York finds itself compelled to acknowledge it. Santa Claus is as much a constituent of the order that is the State as he is of the others. This and the other relevant orders of relations “locate” Santa Claus, to use technical language, which is to say they all provide Santa Claus with his integrity and his identity.

We asked earlier whether it might be possible to acknowledge the impact of family, politics, commerce and the State on custom, but deny that the force of custom, law, or mass culture has any implications for ontology. In the context of a relational, ordinal ontology, however, family, politics, commerce, and the State are all orders of relations, no more or less real than any other orders of relations. Those orders locate constituent complexes, and it is the prevalence of those constituent complexes that conveys on them their reality. That some of the constituent complexes of this or that order are fictional characters has no bearing on the matter. Of course there are common non-philosophical uses of the terms “exist” and “real” with which we make this distinction. We may ask of Hamlet, for exam-

ple, whether he was a “real” Prince of Denmark. In ordinal terms, however, to ask that question is not to ask whether Hamlet is real, whether he prevails in some order, but rather it asks whether Hamlet prevailed in a particular order, specifically late medieval Denmark long before Shakespeare lived. To answer that he did not prevail in that order is not to deny Hamlet’s reality or existence because he continues to prevail in many other orders. It is simply to say that the complex that is Hamlet does not include as one of its ordinal locations late medieval Denmark, not at least outside the order of relations that is the play. Similarly, we may acknowledge the reality of Santa Claus and still deny that among his traits is that he lives in a house we would find at the North Pole were we to travel there to look, or that our radar would detect his reindeer and sleigh on Christmas Eve.

So the answer to the question whether we can identify a role in family, politics, commerce, and the law for Santa Claus but nevertheless deny his existence is that we cannot. To locate Santa Claus in those orders is to affirm his reality. The question, again, is “how and in what sense” Santa Claus is real. *Miracle on 34th Street* has, as surprising as it may be, provided a compelling ordinal argument for the existence of Santa Claus. That the film works as well as it does at the level of its reception in the culture is itself something of a pragmatic argument for the reasonableness of an ordinal ontology. To deny Santa Claus is impossible for cultural reasons that we can understand, and an ordinal ontology helps us to understand the same point as a matter of technical philosophy.

