

De distinctione 'de re/de dicto'

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It is usually recognized that the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* beliefs is twofold: a distinction between kinds of belief reports and a distinction between beliefs themselves. A belief is *de re* if the believer is “in an appropriate nonconceptual, contextual relation to objects the belief is about.” (Burge 2007, 51). They are different from beliefs that relate to objects through satisfaction conditions. For Burge, the epistemological distinction is more fundamental than the one concerning ascriptions: a *de re* report is simply a report of a *de re* belief. For others, on the contrary, the primitive distinction is between kinds of report. According to Taylor, for instance, Burge is right in claiming that the contrast between *de re* and *de dicto* beliefs and *de re* and *de dicto* ascriptions makes no sense, but his remarks are to be taken as “about ascriptions rather than about beliefs.” (Taylor 2002, 259)

Different kinds of belief leads to different kinds of report: one can report a relational belief, saying that someone has a belief about a certain object, and a notional belief, attributing a general belief. This point appears in discussions about quantification into belief contexts, in which the ascriber is committed to the existence of the object, as opposed to quantification within belief contexts, in which this is not the case. Recanati has convincingly argued that this distinction is orthogonal to the distinction between transparent and opaque belief reports. (Recanati 2000, 121-136). This point is shown by Loar’s “dual role” of singular terms in embedded sentences (Loar, 1972). We can use Quine’s story. Ralph sees Ortcutt in some suspicious circumstances, and came to believe that Ortcutt is a spy. However, he does not believe true the sentence ‘Ortcutt is a spy’. The first is a *de re* ascription, the second, a *de dicto* ascription of the same *de re* belief. What distinguishes one report from another is not the nature of the reported belief, but whether the report is “notionally sensitive” to Ralph’s perspective or not. This latter distinction is proper to reports, and doesn’t apply to the reported beliefs. According to Fauconnier, the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* is precisely whether the report is made from the speaker’s point of view or from the thinker’s point of view. (Fauconnier 1997, 51) This can’t be exactly right, since one cannot talk from a perspective totally alien to his own (pretense aside). The crucial point is whether the speaker presents the belief in a way compatible with the ascriber’s perspective on the situation.

We are watching Ralph look at a suspicious character wearing a brown hat, and I say: ‘Ralph thinks that the man in a brown hat is a spy’. We know that Ralph has two sets of beliefs about this man, and in making this ascription, I try to be sensitive to this fact: I don’t say ‘Ralph thinks that Ortcutt is a spy’. My ascription is a true notionally sensitive report, it picks up a belief Ralph does have. But is this really his belief? Doesn’t he believe true the sentence ‘the man wearing a black coat is a spy’? As we try to present Ralph’s notion of Ortcutt, we find ourselves unable to make a non-arbitrary choice as to what is the way he thinks about this suspicious character.

A suggestion: we can pick up any member of the conglomeration that constitutes one of the “vivid names” Ralph has of Ortcutt, without caring to choose a specific one as representing *the* correct ascription. We have here a contrast between notionally sensitive and notionally neutral ascriptions: if the attributor indicates the object the file is about, without caring whether the particular indicator he chooses is part of the attributee’s file about the same object, than the ascription is *de re*. If he chooses an indicator he believes to be a component of the ascriber’s vivid name for this object, then the ascription is *de dicto*. Neither kind of ascriptions will lead to only one expression as the right choice. This is what Quine himself does, as he says that

“Ralph is ready enough to say, in all sincerity, ‘Bernard J. Ortcutt is no spy.’” (Quine 1956/1976, 187) Until then, we only knew about a certain gray-haired man not believed to be a spy, not that Ralph knew his name. They are part of the same object vivid name.

This relative indeterminacy of belief reports is not unconnected to the nature of beliefs themselves. Let us imagine Ralph, in the grip of a paranoia, following Ortcutt. He sees Ortcutt in his brown hat, smells his cigarette, hears the noise of his shoes. There is no experience of seeing a particular shape, of sensing a particular smell, or of hearing a particular sound, that remains constant, as Ralph tries to keep track of Ortcutt. He exercises different capacities unified by the fact that he is tracking the same individual in the same evolving situation. No one particular description will be able to capture *the* indicator he uses to do it, because there is no one particular indicator he uses to do it; this fact is reflected in the indeterminacy of notionally sensitive ascriptions.

There is still the problem of explaining how we can make such *de dicto* ascriptions. I want to suggest that the answer is that the attributor tries to adjust his perspective to the one the attributee has of the situation. We can pick up any indicator of Ortcutt that can be reasonably attributed to Ralph in the situations in which he acquired the belief that the man is a spy, given what we know about Ralph (that he is not blind, nor color blind etc.) and about the circumstances in which he has acquired such belief (that he was not too distant from Ortcutt, etc.). This adjustment is defeasible, but reliable. We do try often to adjust our perspective to other people’s perspective on situations. This is the case in what Herbert Clark and co-workers call an *acceptance cycle*, in which interlocutor tries to reach a mutual agreement about the object being talked about. (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986, 24) This process suggests a way to interpret the choice of particular expressions in a notionally sensitive ascription of beliefs. If it is relevant to make a notionally sensitive ascription, especially if the attributor wants to contrast two conflicting attitudes towards the same object, the attributor has to adjust his descriptions to the attributee’s perspective, in a way that is analogous to the choice of expressions in the process of reaching the mutual acceptance of a referent.

In order to make notionally sensitive ascriptions, we use strategies that are in some aspects similar to the ones we use as we adjust our talk to the perspective our interlocutor has on a situation. In both cases, there is not one, and only one correct expression, that can be used, but a set a expressions can be used, with more or less felicity, as an adjustment to the addressee’s/attributee’s perspective. The reason of this similarity comes from the fact that, in both cases, we are trying to understand other people’s behavior; as one tries to adjust one own perspective to someone else’s perspective on a situation, most of the time there will be different and equivalent ways to do it. Both the parallel between dialogues and belief ascriptions and the shift in the approach to notionally sensitive ascriptions proposed seems to me to be a consequence of taking into account the diversity in the choice of expressions to make equivalent *de dicto* ascriptions. To state a more modest thesis: this diversity should be taken as an *explanandum* in a theory of belief ascriptions.

It seems to me especially important to notice that the direction of explanation goes from the capacity of understanding other people that appears in the coordination of behavior to attitude ascriptions. It is therefore natural to look for an explanation of the workings of attitude ascriptions, including the distinction between notionally sensitive and notionally insensitive ones, in our more general capacity to understand and coordinate our behavior with others. This could explain the similarities of the particular dynamics of acceptance cycles and of notionally sensitive ascriptions.