

DE RE BELIEF

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Philosophical issues of the present are often seen more clearly when they are set against the background of philosophical problems of the past. In the following remarks I propose to examine some current issues in the philosophy of language against the background of an argument, widely acknowledged to be spurious, that Descartes offered in support of the claim that he is not identical with his body. Our purpose will be to isolate the fault of Descartes' argument, and doing so will require our coming to grips with some important issues in the philosophy of language.

The argument I want to focus on is suggested in the following passage from Part IV of the *Discourse*:

I then considered attentively what I was; and I saw that while I could feign that I had no body, that there was no world, and no place existed for me to be in, I could not feign that I was not; on the contrary from the mere fact that I thought of doubting about other truths it evidently and certainly followed that I existed . . . From this I recognized that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is to be conscious and whose being requires no place and depends on no material thing.¹

The argument I have in mind (call it the 'Argument from Doubt') gets a clearer statement in *The Search After Truth* when Polyander says that he is not a body, for otherwise, doubting of his body he should at the same time doubt of himself, and this he cannot do.² We can reconstruct the argument as follows:

¹ *Descartes Philosophical Writings*, translated and edited by Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach (London, 1970), p. 32 (hereafter cited as AG). At least two arguments are suggested in this passage. I have quoted only what pertains to the one I intend to examine.

² *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, translated by E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (Cambridge, 1970), I, p. 319 (hereafter cited as HR).

Diálogos 31 (1978), pp. 59-71

- 1) I can doubt that my body exists.
 - 2) I cannot doubt that I exist.
-
- 3) I am not identical with my body.

So reconstructed, the argument, has its faults, and the commentators purport to have exposed them.

Anthony Kenny, for example, has objected that the move from (1) and (2) to (3) depends upon the Principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals.³ If that is correct, the argument's formal structure looks like this:

- 4) Fb
 - 5) $\neg Fs$
 - 6) $(x)(y)((x=y) \supset (Fx \equiv Fy))$
 - 7) $(b=s) \supset (Fb \equiv Fs)$
 - 8) $\neg(Fb \equiv Fs)$
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- 9) $\neg(b=s)$

Kenny's objection is that the principle here used, (6), has a restricted range of application. In particular, we are enjoined by the existence of counter-examples from applying it in modal and intensional contexts. What makes its use not available to Descartes is that (1) and (2) provide a context that is both modal and intensional. So, Kenny says, the argument is to be rejected as needing a principle not applicable to its premises; or, as some would say, a false principle.

Many philosophers remain unconvinced that modal and intensional contexts yield counter-examples to Leibniz' Law. For them, Kenny's objection to the Argument from Doubt is neither welcome nor convincing. But we should find Kenny's objection unconvincing irrespective of our feeling about the range of applicability of Leibniz' Law. It is unconvincing, because in the argument we have constructed the principle is not applied to contexts bound by so-called opacity inducing operators. Filled out, the Argument from Doubt goes as follows:

- 1) I can doubt that my body exists.
- 2) I cannot doubt that I exist.
- 10) My body has the property of being possibly doubted by me to exist.

³ *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy* (New York, 1967), p. 79.

- 11) I do not have the property of being possibly doubted by me to exist.
- 12) $(x) (y) ((x=y) \supset (Fx \equiv Fy))$
- 13) If I am identical with my body, then my body has the property of being possibly doubted by me to exist if and only if I have that property.
- 14) My body, but not me, has the property of being possibly doubted by me to exist.
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- 15) I am not identical with my body.

We can see that Leibniz' Law is applied not to (1) and (2), as Kenny's objection suggests, but rather to (10) and (11), contexts that are purely extensional. Kenny's objection does not hold; he has failed to show us what is wrong with the Argument from Doubt. The failure of Kenny's objection, however, does not make the argument more palatable. We are spurred to look elsewhere for its shortcoming.

Fortunately, it seems, we need not look far to discover where the real fault lies. To see where the argument goes wrong, it is helpful to suppose for a moment that Descartes offered a truncated version of the Argument from Doubt, one like our version except with premises (1) and (2) omitted. How should we assess such an argument? It is valid, but we must question the truth of its first two premises ((10) and (11) in our version). What is Descartes' justification for offering them? If he is entertaining the possibility at this juncture that he is identical with his body, then he is not warranted in merely asserting, without proof, that something is true of the one but not the other. That claim requires argued support, and what Descartes has available is the fact, represented by (1) and (2), that he is able to conceive the truth of the proposition that his body does not exist but unable to conceive the truth of the proposition that he does not exist. That, however, is not sufficient. The fact that Descartes doubts that his body exists and the fact that he does not doubt that he exists do not yield the *de re* truth that his body has a property not had by him, that of being doubted to exist.

If I have correctly represented his reasoning, Descartes' error lies in the move from (1) and (2), his only stated premises, to (10) and (11), premises required to get the desired conclusion by application of Leibniz' Law. There is something wrong with the inference from (1) and (2) to (10) and (11), from *de dicto* propositions to their *de re* counterparts (following the tradition⁴ let us call this inference

⁴ Cf. Ernest Sosa, "Propositional Attitudes *de Dicto* and *de Re*," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXVII, 21 (Nov. 5, 1970), pp. 883-896.

'exportation'). To see that the inference is amiss, suppose that I am attempting to discover whether John is Tom's father. I reason as follows. I can doubt that John has ever fathered a son, so John has the property of being possibly doubted by me to have ever fathered a son. I cannot doubt that Tom's father has ever fathered a son, so Tom's father does not have the property of being possibly doubted by me to have ever fathered a son. Since John has a property not had by Tom's father, the two are distinct.

Obviously, the argument is invalid. Leibniz' Law is not suspect, so the fault must lie in the move from a *de dicto* proposition to a *de re* proposition. Descartes' procedure is similar to the one above. He infers from its being possible for him to doubt that his body exists and its not being possible for him to doubt that he exists that his body has a property that he does not have, that of being possibly doubted to exist. But, as we have seen, that is not a warranted inference. The Argument from Doubt does not work. But again, the question is, why?

A general objection might suggest itself. It might be argued that the whole enterprise of exportation to *de re* belief is misguided, because there is no such phenomenon as *de re* belief. Or at least there are no such intensional properties as would be expressed by the open sentence 'believed by x to be F '. If there are no such intensional properties (call them '*de re* intensions'), then Descartes cannot argue from his body's having one that he does not have to the conclusion that he and his body are distinct.

I can see two possible lines of defense to which this refusal to countenance *de re* intensions might appeal. The first is to claim that there are no intensional properties at all. Such a stand might be taken by the naturalist who admits into his ontological reservoir no more than physics allows. He holds firmly to this belief that an adequate explanatory account of human affairs can be given without appeal to such abstract entities as the property of being believed by x to be F .

Quine, I take it, is such a naturalist. And recognizing that he is should remind us that the present line of objection is not a proscription against exportation from inside propositional attitudes. The naturalist can provide a nominalistic account of that enterprise. Rather where the naturalist balks is at the prospect of countenancing *de re* intensions. Descartes, you will recall, needs both exportation and *de re* intensions. He needs *de re* intensions to provide a domain of values for the application of Leibniz' Law. And he needs exportation to tell him when Leibniz' Law can be applied. It is the former, not the latter, that the naturalist refuses to grant.

Now so far as I am aware this rationale for the rejection of *de re* intensions rests on no more than a methodological prejudice. Admittedly, it is a prejudice toward which many lean, and perhaps it is one toward which, history will show, we all ought to have inclined. But that is a bet on the future. It carries little present argumentative persuasion. And anyway, those of us who are inclined to grant the existence of at least part of the realm of intensional properties still want to reject Descartes' argument. We, at any rate, must look elsewhere for its fault, so we should consider a second justification that might be offered for refusing to countenance *de re* intensions.

The justification in question rests on the principle that if we have no way of ascertaining whether a thing has a putative property, or what is weaker, if there could be no such method, then there is no reason to suppose that such properties exist, and adequate reason to think that they do not. The antagonist claims further that with respect to *de re* intensions, i.e., properties schematized as 'the property of being believed by x to be F ', there is no principle that tells us when such properties obtain, and for that reason such properties should not be countenanced. To the extent that the present line of argumentation rests merely on the claim that no principle of the kind in question has in fact been formulated, it is unpersuasive. The force of the argument comes rather from the suggestion that we have good inductive grounds and more for supposing that no such principle can be constructed.

The inductive grounds consist in the failure of all previous attempts to provide a principle of exportation, and the additional grounds consist in pointing to the variegated character of belief and its contexts, with the suggestion that the phenomena are too varied ever to be brought under a single principle for exportation. If the test for adequacy in a putative principle of exportation is whether it matches up with our ordinary intuitions, exhibited when we say of a thing x that it is believed by someone to be F , then the antagonist cites as a cause for despair the fact that on some occasions we require little of a person to be able to say that x is believed by him to be F , and on other occasions we require much. There seems to be no principle capable of reflecting such fluidity.

What should we make of the antagonist's position? First, we should ask whether he is correct in claiming the failure of all previous attempts at providing a principle for exportation. Sophisticated attempts have been made by Hintikka,⁵ Kaplan,⁶ Sosa,⁷ Sellars⁸ and

⁵ *Knowledge and Belief* (Ithaca, 1962), and "Sosa on Propositional Attitudes *de Dicto* and *de Re*", *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXVII, 16 (Aug. 19,

recently by Roderick Chisholm in the soon to be published version of his Carus Lectures.⁹ Convincing objections have been raised against all but Chisholm's account, so we should examine it to see whether the pessimism of our antagonist might not perhaps be unwarranted.

To understand Chisholm's exportation principle we need the following three background definitions:

- D1) p entails the property $G =_{df}$ necessarily, if p obtains, then something has G .
- D2) C is an individual concept $=_{df}$ C is a property such that (i) it is possible that something has C and (ii) it is not possible that more than one thing has C at a time.
- D3) p implies x to have the property of being $F =_{df}$ p entails a property G such that: (i) G is an individual concept; (ii) necessarily, whatever has G is F ; and (iii) x is G .

To motivate Chisholm's formulation of his principle we can look first at the broadest candidate that has been offered as a principle of exportation. It can be expressed as:

- D4) S believes of x that it is $F =_{df}$ there is a singular term a that denotes x and is such that S believes " a is ϕ " where ϕ denotes F .

Chisholm characterizes (D4) as excessively permissive because it fails, for example, to capture the difference between Holmes and Watson both of whom believe that the tallest spy is a spy but differ in that Holmes knows who the tallest spy is and Watson does not. It is in just such situations that we are inclined to say that the person who is in fact the tallest spy is believed by Holmes but not by Watson to be a spy. What Holmes has and Watson lacks is a certain epistemic intimacy with the bearer of the property *being the tallest spy*.

Using his typology given in (D1)--(D3) Chisholm attempts to provide a principle of exportation that captures this intimacy. He offers:

1971) pp. 489-497.

⁶ "Quantifying In," in *Words and Objections: Essays on the Work of W.V. Quine*, ed. by D. Davidson and J. Hintikka (Dordrecht-Holland, 1969.)

⁷ *Op. Cit.*

⁸ "Some Problems About Belief," in *Words and Objections (op. cit.)*.

⁹ Forthcoming from Open Court.

D5) S believes of x that it is $F =_{df}$ there is an individual concept C such that (i) S knows a proposition implying x to have C and (ii) S accepts a non-contradictory proposition which is such that necessarily it is true if and only if whatever has C is F .

(D5) guarantees a degree of intimacy between an agent and the object of his belief by requiring, according to condition (i), that the agent have sufficient grounds for knowing a proposition that implies the object of belief to have a property that only it has. The question we should ask, then, is whether the degree of intimacy so required is sufficiently strong to rule out cases where exportation fails, and we should also ask whether the analysis is sufficiently weak to capture all acknowledged cases of *de re* belief. Unfortunately, Chisholm's analysis seems deficient in both respects.

First, we can see from immediate inspection of the principle that if we accept it as providing a principle of exportation we do so at the expense of foreswearing a role for contradictory properties in *de re* belief. That consequence is necessary on Chisholm's principle, since if the condition were not added, then anyone who accepts a contradictory proposition, e.g., 'the circle can be squared', would then be such as to believe himself to possess every property that he does not in fact possess. Now this limitation of Chisholm's principle would be no hindrance at all if it were never the case that an agent believes of something that it has some property in fact contradictory (though, of course, he presumably would not know it to be so). But such is not the case. It is not uncommon for a schoolboy to believe with respect to the figure in front of him that it has the property of being a triangle that is trisectable with the use of straightedge and compass only. The sad fact is that we do sometimes believe contradictory properties to be true of objects, though happily, only where we know the object much better than the supposed property.

Chisholm's exportation principle (D5) is at best of questionable acceptability solely because it is inadequate to account for *de re* attributions of contradictory properties. The principle is too strong. But if that were not enough it is beset by the additional shortcoming of being too weak. The problem is that the first condition of (D5) fails to guarantee the degree of epistemic intimacy that is requisite to exportability. The condition requires only that I know a proposition implying x , the object of my belief, to have a certain property that only it alone can possess while it possesses it. But there are many such properties that I can know to be possessed by things with

which I am only minimally epistemically acquainted. For example, I might overhear mention of Feynman at a party and gain no more than enough knowledge to know that only one person is being talked about. In such a situation, if I reflect on it at all, I'll see that I know that Feynman is Feynman and since knowing involves believing, I'll also believe it. But then I've met the conditions (D5) would impose for our saying that I believe *of* Feynman that he has the property of being identical with Feynman. That is, I know a proposition, namely, 'Feynman is Feynman', that implies Feynman to have a certain individual concept, that of being Feynman, and I accept a proposition that is necessarily such that whatever has the property of being Feynman has the property of being Feynman. (D5) obviously suffers from a fatal case of susceptibility to counter-examples. Indefinitely many could be constructed using the schemes of the Feynman example. A slightly different and slightly less trivial example could be constructed where I know that there is a tallest spy, but know nothing much about him beyond the fact that he is a spy. In that case I know the proposition 'the tallest spy is identical with the tallest spy', and I accept the proposition 'the tallest spy is a spy' and therefore, by (D5), am falsely said to believe of him that he is a spy. The problem with (D5) is obvious. To avoid this kind of counter-example we need to rule out, in condition (i), such trivial propositions as those that Leibniz called explicit identicals, propositions of the form 'A=A' and 'AB is B'. But I think this a hopeless task since it relies upon the ill-defined and ill-understood notion of the logical form of atomic propositions. In addition, it is probable that we, like Leibniz, would be forced to appeal to a stock of predicate definitions and therein lies logical quicksand.

We conclude, then, that Chisholm's exportation principle, the only previously unimpeached candidate, must be rejected as irreparable. Where does that leave us? You will recall that the search for an acceptable principle of exportation was conducted in an effort to respond to the skeptic who denies the existence of *de re* intensions by appeal to the claimed impossibility of ascertaining, in a given circumstance, whether an object in fact has the property of being believed by someone to have some particular property. Our failure to respond to the skeptic's challenge by providing an acceptable principle does not show that one cannot be found. The search must continue, and frankly, I am sanguine about the possibility of success.

The important fact that warrants sanguinity is that we seem to be able to agree on which cases of belief allow exportation and which

do not. Admittedly, as we have already agreed, in some circumstances we require a great deal of epistemic intimacy between the speaker and the object of his belief, and in other circumstances we require very little. But that fact is unimportant so long as our intuitions agree on the question of which circumstances require what degree of intimacy. Or perhaps, since we do not have a metric for degrees of intimacy, the point could be put less misleadingly by saying that what is important is simply that our intuitions mesh when we sit down to parse cases by the test of whether we think exportation permissible with respect to the case in question. If our intuitions fail to match a significant portion of the times, then there would be good reason to abandon the search for a principle of exportation, but so long as they match, there is reason for hope and reason to persevere in the quest for a successful principle.

Now since I am inclined to think that a successful principle *is* on the horizon, and since the claim that no such principle could be found was to justify our refusal to countenance *de re* intentions, I am then left with no answer to the questions 'what's wrong with Descartes' Argument from Doubt.'" We must continue to seek its fault.

To review the problem briefly, we have seen that Descartes' argument makes use of exportation from *de dicto* belief statements like (1) and (2) to *de re* belief statements like (10) and (11). And we have seen by use of the example involving John and Tom's Father that the fault with Descartes' argument must lie somewhere in such exportation. *But* not all cases of exportation are to be proscribed. It can be argued that all I have shown with my counter-example is that the exportation as a principle of inference is not universally applicable, but that there are cases, Descartes' possibly being one, in which exportation is permissible. For example, my believing true the proposition *The tallest spy is a spy* does not by itself warrant the claim that I believe of Jones, who happens to be the tallest spy, that he is a spy. But, one might argue, I am sufficiently well acquainted with my body and with myself to be warranted in claiming that I have *de re* beliefs with respect to them that I have inferred from my *de dicto* beliefs in which they play a role. For example, I can infer from:

(16) I believe that I am speaking.

the *de re* proposition:

(17) I believe of myself that I am speaking

Descartes' case, of course, is an inference of just this sort, and it would appear to be sanctionable. But, again, I think it is not. At least, not entirely. Someone might object to the inference in Descartes' case with the claim that his is a special case. It is special in that the very issue he is trying to settle, i.e., the nature of this relation to his body, is one about which he ought to be clear before he can be said to have an adequate acquaintance with the objects of which he is said in (10) and (11) to have *de re* beliefs. That is, if he is trying to determine, and does not yet know, whether he is identical with his body, then he cannot be sure that in doubting that his body exists he does not also doubt, in an oblique fashion (or under a different description of himself) that he exists. So, the argument goes, Descartes is not warranted in exporting from (1) and (2) to (10) and (11); he does not have the requisite acquaintance with himself and his body to make the inference in this case.

The argument is appealing, but I think it is only half right, I want to claim that Descartes would be warranted in exporting from (1) to (10) but not from (2) to (11). Indeed, it seems dubious that it is ever the case that an exportation of:

18) It is not the case that I believe of x that is F .

from:

19) It is not the case that I believe that x is F .

is permissible. That is, I deny the allowability of exportation from the denial of a *de dicto* belief statement of the denial of a *de re* belief. Certainly such exportation, conjoined with exportation from such statements as:

20) I believe that x is F .

to:

21) I believe of x that it is F .

leads to trouble. For example, suppose that I am witness to a bank robbery by the Masked Bandit. I am in the bank, I watch him empty the cash drawers, hear him order the customers and tellers about, etc. In such case, I would be warranted in exporting to:

22) I believe of the Masked Bandit that he is a bank robber.

do not. Admittedly, as we have already agreed, in some circumstances we require a great deal of epistemic intimacy between the speaker and the object of his belief, and in other circumstances we require very little. But that fact is unimportant so long as our intuitions agree on the question of which circumstances require what degree of intimacy. Or perhaps, since we do not have a metric for degrees of intimacy, the point could be put less misleadingly by saying that what is important is simply that our intuitions mesh when we sit down to parse cases by the test of whether we think exportation permissible with respect to the case in question. If our intuitions fail to match a significant portion of the times, then there would be good reason to abandon the search for a principle of exportation, but so long as they match, there is reason for hope and reason to persevere in the quest for a successful principle.

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22) I believe of the Masked Bandit that he is a bank robber.

from:

23) I believe that the Masked Bandit is a bank robber.¹⁰

And suppose further that my neighbor, unbeknownst to me, is in fact the Masked Bandit, though I regard him as a paragon of virtue and the last person I would suspect of wrongdoing. In this case it would be acceptable to export to:

24) I believe of my neighbor that he is not a bank robber.

from:

25) I believe that my neighbor is not a bank robber.

Given the truth of:

26) My neighbor = the Masked Bandit.

and the fact that (22) provides a context in which 'the Masked Bandit' occurs extensionally, we can infer from (22) and (26) the truth of:

27) I believe of my neighbor that he is a bank robber.

And we could conjoin (25) and (27) to get:

28) I believe of my neighbor that he is a bank robber and I believe of my neighbor that he is not a bank robber.

(28) is not an inconsistent proposition. It is, in fact, true, though it arises from my believing propositions that are inconsistent with each other. Notice that (28) is to be distinguished from:

29) I believe that my neighbor is a bank robber and not a bank robber.

¹⁰ I don't mean here to imply that all of our *de re* beliefs are arrived at by exportation from *de dicto* beliefs. I simply mean to claim that exportation is warranted in this case. Replace 'I' in (22) and (23) with 'Hooker' and, *mutatis mutandis*, (22) expresses a proposition that you would be warranted in inferring from (23) if you knew the latter and the additional facts about me given above.

(29) expresses an inconsistent belief. Presumably rational agents do not hold beliefs like (29), though they do, unfortunately, often hold beliefs that are mutually inconsistent (in this case, (23) and (25)). But notice that both (28) and (29) are to be distinguished from:

30) It is the case that I believe of my neighbor that he is a bank robber and it is not the case that I believe of my neighbor that he is a bank robber.

(30) is a straightforward contradiction; unlike (28), there are no circumstances under which it is true. However, we will be saddled with statements like (30) if we allow exportation both from belief statements and from the denials of belief statements (i.e., from statements like (2) in the Argument from Doubt). For example, if in the above situation I infer:

31) It is not the case that I believe of my neighbor that he is a bank robber.

from the true statement:

32) It is not the case that I believe that my neighbor is a bank robber.

then (31) will be inconsistent with (27), which is also a true statement. In short, allowing exportation in the case of both affirmations and denials of *de dicto* belief statements opens the way to a plethora of contradictions.

It seems apparent, then, that if we are going to allow exportation in belief contexts, we ought not to allow it with respect to both the affirmation and the denial of belief statements. We should allow its use in the appropriate affirmative cases and proscribe its use in all cases of the denial of a *de dicto* belief. One can never be sure of denying the existence of a *de re* belief that the belief is not in fact held, though under a description of the object of belief that does not allow the agent to notice that the two objects in question are identical.

At any rate, it is certain that if exportation is ever allowable in the case of the denial of a belief, it is at least not so allowable in Descartes' case, i.e., in the move from (2) to (11). In the context in which the Argument from Doubt appears, Descartes must grant that it may turn out that he does indeed doubt of himself that he exists when he doubts of his body that it exists. It would turn out that way

if, unbeknownst to him but conceded by him to be possible, he was identical with his body. I conclude, then, that the Argument from Doubt is invalid; it relies upon a rule of inference whose application is not warranted in the context in which it is applied.¹¹

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¹¹ I am grateful to Roderick Chisholm for discussion of the issues treated here.