

Intentional Identity from the Perspective of De Re/De Dicto Distinction

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In the presented work, I am going to study the idea of intentional identity. Initially, it was stated for the first time in a rather short, but profound article by Peter Geach (1967). According to this philosopher, the phenomenon of intentional identity arises when agents share a “*common focus*” no matter how many of them there are (Geach, 1967, p. 627). Interestingly, It can be even a single person considered at different time periods (ibid). Moreover, it is not necessary for the object at question to genuinely exist. Assuming that I was allowed to draw analogies, I would follow Geach himself and compare people with a common focus to archers who aim at the same target: a present or an imaginary one (ibid). Thus, intentional identity is opposed by actual identity that deals with the objective sameness of real objects.

The notion of intentional identity itself gives no problem. However, when people start to discuss the subject of their intentions and to form propositional attitudes about it, especially beliefs, the issue becomes intricate. In order to illustrate such sophisticated cases, Geach designs an example that has given food for thought to many future philosophers of language (Geach, 1967, p. 627-628). Imagine two countrymen Hob and Nob who find out about witches from a provincial newspaper. Hob believes that a witch has blighted Bob’s mare and Nob believes that she (the same witch) has killed Cob’s cow (1).

Common sense suggests that witches do not encounter in real life. Nonetheless, these are different interpretations of sentence (1) that determine the existence of witches for characters with certain beliefs. Basically, one can distinguish between two readings of such statements deriving entailments from them. Thus, it is possible to consider sentences similar to (1) in de re and de dicto senses. According to the first approach, there is really one and the same witch about which Hob and Nob have beliefs. As for the second one, it is exactly the opposite. For this reason, some researchers, for example W. Edelberg, admit that the “de dicto” term is not appropriate here because the second reading simply means “not de re” (Edelberg, 2006, p. 485). Both interpretations have a right to exist, but in different scenarios. Unlike the de re reading, the de dicto one would be true if witches had never entered our real world and Hob and Nob had never communicated with each other. The last of the two conditions guarantees that there is no way how the countrymen could have in mind one and the same witch.

As it follows from the definition of intentional identity, the presence of non-existent objects like witches is not troublesome. Then, a careful reader might become curious why so many philosophers of language are interested in the problem of intentional identity. There are three reasons for that. Firstly, neither de re nor de dicto readings of (1) cannot be formalized by means of first-order predicate calculus (Edelberg, 2006, p. 484-486). This observation shows that we are still not able to capture perfectly the essence of propositional attitudes. Secondly, intentional identity raises doubts not only about technical tools, but also about existing semantic theories. One of those who is especially interested in the last kind of challenges is W. Lanier (2013). Finally, what philosophers of language still lack is an adequate theory of intentional identity. It would explain properly whether there is one object at focus at least in most sentences with propositional attitudes included. Attempts to offer such a theory have been made by W. Edelberg and A. Sandgren (Edelberg, 1995; Sandragen, 2016). However, why should one really

care about a general theory of intentional identity? At the very least, it might be useful for disagreements. Often, they centre around a subject change that can be actual or only seeming. Thus, the theory of intentional identity would help to distinguish between genuine and just verbal disagreements respectively (Chalmers, 2011).

In conclusion, I would like to underline that the problem of intentional identity is not local. It lies at the intersection of fundamental problems posed in philosophy of language. Moreover, the challenges brought about by Geach cry out for new approaches to formalization.

References

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