PLANTINGA ON NECESSITY *DE RE*

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In *God and Other Minds* ([1]) Alvin Plantinga devotes some space to an argument against the existence of God. Since God must be supposed to have His properties necessarily, the argument goes, and since such essentialism makes no sense, it follows that the existence of God (as we must suppose Him to be) likewise makes no sense. Plantinga disagrees with the conclusion of that argument, and he proceeds to develop what he takes to be a coherent account of essentialism. In his recent paper "*De Re* and *De Dicto*" ([2]) he has set out the same account in somewhat different language. In this paper I will take up Plantinga's account and defend it against a certain plausible objection; but I will try in the end to show that the suggested account, and any account set out along the same lines, is inadequate.

Statements of essentialism are *de re* statements of necessity: and the task Plantinga sets for himself is to explain such *de re* statements solely in terms of *de dicto* statements of necessity. If he succeeds, then *de re* necessity — and essentialism — — should prove palatable to those who admit only statement or propositional necessity.

Quine's objections to the notion of *de re* necessity are well known. Plantinga traces such objections to the following definition of *de re* necessity, a definition which must be assumed if the objections are to make any sense at all:

> (1)   An object x has a property P essentially = def. the proposition x *has* P is necessarily true. ([3])

If the *de re* is understood in this way it is, as Plantinga points out, subject to certain obvious difficulties. For example, (1)

would allow us to infer that all cyclists are necessarily two-legged; for it is a necessary truth that all cyclists are two-legged.

It is open to us then either to maintain (1) and reject the *de re*; or to maintain the *de re* and reject (1). Plantinga rejects (1); but apparently this does not seem to him a sufficient defense of the *de re,* and he goes ahead to give an account of it, along the lines indicated by (1). In doing this, he eliminates what he takes to be the culprit: descriptions used to designate the subjects of propositions. (1) is not itself to blame; it is rather that we allow expressions like "a cyclist" and "the tallest man to climb Everest" to serve as subject terms in sentences employed in the proposed analysis. If we restricted substituends for 'x' in (1) to proper names, handled predicates similarly, and appealed to necessarily false instead of necessarily true statements, then we would not have to contend with the problems raised by analytically true and analytically false statements in conjunction with (1).

Adopting these restrictions, Plantinga explains the *de re* in terms of the *de dicto* in this way: a thing is essentially P if and only if that thing is P and, for some proper name 'a' of that thing (a name which we might have to provide), and some proper designation 'F' of P, *a is non-F* is necessarily false. Socrates was rational; and if *Socrates is lacking in rationality* is necessarily false we may say that the individual Socrates is necessarily, and essentially, rational. Plantinga puts the equivalence like this:

(2)   x has P necessarily if and only if x has P and the proposition x *lacks P* is necessarily false (where the domain of the variable 'x' is unlimited but its substituend set contains only proper names, and where the domain of the variable 'P' is the set of properties and its substituend set contains no definite description or expressions definitionally equivalent to definite descriptions.)

(3)   P is an essential property of x if and only if x has P

and there is a being y identical with x and a proper-
ty P' identical with P such that y has P' necessarily
(in the sense of (3)). (⁴)

If these equivalences prove to be right, then he will have
given a coherent explanation of *de re* necessity. Of course,
having succeeded in proving it a respectable notion he will
have rendered it eliminable from philosophical language. The
logic of the necessity of statements or propositions, *de dicto*
necessity, will be adequate to our needs. Whoever believes
that the *de re* cannot be explained *de dicto*, whoever sees it
as an irreducible notion, is required to show that (2) and (3)
do not work. This seems in fact to be the motivation behind
certain objections raised by Richard Cartwright. (⁵)

The most forceful objection that Cartwright brings against
the explanation is that there is no clear sense in which the
proposition expressed by

(4)   Socrates is not a man

could be shown to be necessarily false. We know that

(5)   The tallest bachelor in this room is not a man

is necessarily false; we know that

(6)   The tallest bachelor in this room is not a bachelor

is necessarily false; and likewise

(7)   The tallest bachelor in this room is not either a
philosopher or not a philosopher

is necessarily false. (4) does not resemble any of (5), (6) or (7),
insofar as what leads us to think that these latter are necess-
arily false will not suffice to convince us that (4) is necessarily
false. Is there another sort of necessity that applies to state-
ments like (4) ? If so, what sort is it ? How do we determine

whether statements are necessarily true or false, in that sense of necessity ? The small likelihood that positive answers could be given to such questions is appealed to by Cartwright to show that Plantinga has made use of a notion of necessity at least as obscure as that of *de re* necessity.

Nor can the reply be made that this objection to (4) only goes to show that manhood is not among the essential properties of Socrates. The objection is meant to show that it is difficult to see how *any* statement with a proper name for the subject term might be determined to be necessarily false. And it seems to me that Cartwright is right in this.

Nevertheless Plantinga's thesis can be defended against Cartwright. For although it may be difficult or impossible to determine in every case whether such statements are necessary or necessarily false, nothing follows about the possibility of such statements *being* necessary or necessarily false. What is relevant here is simply whether such a thing makes sense: whether there is some sense in which statements like (4) can be said to be necessarily false. And there is in fact at least one: (4) is false just in case in every world in which there is a Socrates, he is a man.

Whether or not, then, there is a way of establishing the necessity or impossibility of such statements in every case, it is wrong to suppose that they cannot be necessary; in at least one sense they can be, and in that sense some of them are. For example,

(8)   Socrates is not either rational nor irrational

is necessarly false; and

(9)   It is false that Socrates is not either rational or irrational

expresses a necessary proposition. And (8) is necessarily false and (9) necessary, just because there is no possible world in which Socrates is not either rational or irrational.

It seems to me that none of the arguments directed against Plantinga's explanation by Cartwright is conclusive. Nevertheless the explanation seems to me inadequate, and I will now try to show why.

All that is required for

(10)   It is necessarily false that Socrates is non-rational

to be true is that the proposition that Socrates is non-rational be false in every possible world; that the person who is Socrates in any possible world be rational in that world. What is required for the *de re* statement

(11)   Socrates is necessarily rational

to be true is that the individual which in this world is Socrates be in every world rational, or non-existent.

Now consider the following state of affairs: suppose that being Socrates, like being the first president of the United States, is something that is true of different individuals in different worlds (suppose, that is, that "Socrates" is a disguised description, as some have supposed it is). For the sake of the argument it does not matter whether this supposition is false, or even necessarily false, as I will try to make clear.

On that supposition, it would seem, Plantinga's explanation of *de re* necessity is inadequate. The individual Socrates, far from being rational in all possible worlds, cannot be counted on even to be Socrates in all of them, just as the first president is not the first president in all possible worlds. And so it might happen that the explanans

(12)   Socrates is rational and necessarily it is false that
       Socrates is non-rational

is true while the explanandum (11) is false; that is, (12) might be true, and yet Socrates be possibly non-rational. For although the explanans insures that in every world in which there is a Socrates that individual is rational, nevertheless that in-

dividual who actually is Socrates might be someone or something other than Socrates in some world.

All that that proves, it will be countered, is that a disguised description is not a proper name. The supposition that Socrates could be someone other than Socrates must be false if "Socrates" is a proper name, and not a mere description; therefore if "Socrates" is in fact a proper name, then (12) is an adequate explanation of (11). Our supposition was not merely false, it was necessarily false; and just as the analysis of "John is a bachelor" as "John is male and John is unmarried" need not include the necessary truth that all bachelors are unmarried males, so the explanation of *de re* necessity statements need not include the necessary truth that, where 'a' is a proper name,

(13)   a is necessarily a.

The point I want to make here is this: if something like (13) must be included among the necessary truths for Plantinga's explanation to work, it must itself be explainable *de dicto*, or else the *de re* is not eliminable. But it should be evident that no translation into the *de dicto* will give us back what (13) tells us. In particular Plantinga's proposed explanation

(14)   a is a and it is necessarily false that a is not a

while it is true does not give us that sense of (13) which is required to fill the gap between Plantinga's *de dicto* equivalent and *de re* necessity. And the qualification that 'a' is a proper name adds nothing, unless that is taken to entail (13), in which case it will itself stand in need of explanation.

There is no *de dicto* translation of (13) that will supply what is needed; precisely what is lacking from any such translation is (13) itself. For although we can be assured that in no world is it true that a is not a, that can only translate (13) in the sense required, if a is one and the same individual in every world; it can only translate (13) if it contains a statement of (13) within itself. A generalization of (13) is necessary for Plan-

tinga's explanation; but in the sense in which it is necessary it is not translatable *de dicto*. And so there is at least one *de re* statement of necessity that does not yield to the proposed treatment.

This discrepancy was not as obvious as it might have been because of Plantinga's decision to handle the restrictions within his account in a non-rigorous manner. What is essentially at issue is the dependence of that account on the concept of a proper name. We need to be able to characterize proper names within the language, to set them off from other singular terms; if the singular terms in our language were restricted externally to proper names, there would be no problem. But Plantinga obviously wants to be able to deal with a language that includes non-proper names — with something like the English language, as a matter of fact. There must therefore be some criterion for proper names if his explanation is to be implemented. What might such a criterion be ? It seems clear that what Plantinga needs are not what we usually call proper names; such names might in fact be disguised descriptions, as I have pointed out. What is required are *necessary* names, names that refer to one and the same thing in every possible world. (13) is itself a criterion for such names; any singular term that does not satisfy (13) will not be a necessary name. The explanans in (2) therefore must contain some form of (13). It may say, for example "where the substituend set of the variable 'x' contains only names 'a' such that "a is necessarily a" is true." If (13) then is not explainable in the manner Plantinga proposes, we cannot do without the *de re*. On the other hand if it *is* so explainable, one of two things must be true: either (13) must occur unexplained in its own explanans, or every singular term must qualify as a necessary name: for if we do not restrict terms to necessary names by including (13) in the explanans, since for every singular term 'b' it is necessarily false that b is not b every singular term must be a necessary name. The restriction to necessary names therefore fails, and the inadequacy of the explanation is thus reflected at the level of syntax.

Now it might finally be objected that statements like

(11)   Socrates is necessarily rational

are traditionally understood to mean simply that in any given
world whoever is Socrates is also rational. That of course may
be the case. But on that interpretation (11) is just *de dicto* to
begin with; the proposed explanation is not an explanation
of the *de re* as it is understood in this paper. It would be
correct but uninteresting. (⁶)

NOTES

(¹) Ithaca, New York, 1967, pp. 175 ff.
(²) *Noûs*, III (1969), 235-258.
(³) *"De Re* and *De Dicto,"* p. 242.
(⁴) *God and Other Minds*, pp. 179 f.
(⁵) "Some Remarks on Essentialism," J.P, LXV (1968), 615-626.
(⁶) This paper was read at the Western Division meeting of the APA in
May, 1972.