

XI INDEXICALS & DE SE ATTITUDES

Propositions and Indexicals

So far we have treated the objects of belief and assertion as propositions; and we have treated indexicals as though they were singular terms like any other. But consider the difference between:

(1) I am in a mess

And

(2) NN is in a mess

Where 'NN' is a name for you. It seems that one can believe either of these without believing the other. So, on a Fregean doctrine, we must take 'NN' and 'I' to have different senses. What is the sense of the latter? Any description that we try to put in that doesn't itself contain an indexical will not do the job. Indeed it is unclear that there is any concept that we have that corresponds to 'I'. (This is clearer if we consider 'now'.) But if we cannot come up with a sense for the indexical, how are we to understand the proposition in which it supposedly appears?

In general: No amount of belief about the world will enable one to locate oneself in the world. (Lingens; the two Gods.) But if propositions are ways of describing the world (this comes out most clearly if one understand them as classes of possible worlds), then no self-locating belief will be a proposition. In Lewis's terminology, the *de se* (the self-locating) does not reduce to the *de dicto*. This applies equally to other attitudes than belief (e.g. desire); and to temporal location as well as spatial (the insomniac; 'Thank goodness that's over').

De Re

Does it help if we move to *de re* belief ascriptions? No: one can still have a belief about oneself (understood *de re*) that one is in a mess, without believing (1).

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This is Frege's own solution. 'Everyone is presented to himself in a special and primitive way in which he is presented to no-one else' ('The Thought', p. 359) What does it mean? How do we manage to communicate? How do we make sense of what two people, each of whom believes (1), have in common?

Lewis

Take the basic form of a belief ascription to be the self-ascription of a property. All beliefs are thus *de se*. *De dicto* is a special case of *de se*, where what one self-ascriptes is world membership.

Note that there are two moves here: first Lewis takes the primitive relation to be self-ascription. So there is no need to get the *de se* element into the *content* of the attitude; rather it goes into the *attitude* itself (i.e. the attitude that is the attitude to the content). Second, Lewis takes the contents of the attitudes to be properties rather than propositions.

Most of Lewis's discussion focuses on the second of these two moves. Perhaps this was because he was already assuming the first in his account of *de re* belief (one self-ascribes membership of a world; to see the significance of this, imagine coming up with a version of the two gods example in which the gods don't even know which world they are in). But the first is equally significant. It is very different to the Fregean approach, which doesn't think of belief as any kind of self-ascription.

Perhaps we can leave self-ascription as primitive, but it would be good to know a bit more about it. In particular, what is the relation between self-ascription of a property and the ascription of that property to a particular physical or mental entity? Is self-ascribing a property *p* the same as thinking 'I am *p*'. If so, what is it that is denoted by 'I'? Do we have independent access to it, or is it, so to speak, the shadow of the self-ascriptions?