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DE RE/DE DICTO DISTINCTIONS (SYNTACTIC, SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION)

Abstract: The aim of this article is the systematization of the most commonly applied *de re/de dicto* distinctions in philosophy. In this work the most important contexts in which these distinctions occur are distinguished, and their syntactic, semantic and pragmatic definitions are given. The article consists of two parts: 1) the main theoretical contexts of this distinction, 2) the modern attempt to systematize different versions of this distinction following Thomas McKay and Michael Nelson, and 3) an attempt to clarify McKay's and Nelson's systematization in terms of intensional operator, designator and conviction of the object.

I

The philosophical characterization of modality up to the 20th century (the Antiquity and the Middle Ages) may be considered from three perspectives:

1) **essentialism** – properties belong to objects in two ways: accidental and essential; properties which belong to an object in the second way determine its essence (Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas) (Bacon 1998, p. 668);

2) **modal realism** (as opposed to **modal nominalism**, professed, among others, by Ockham) – states that modalities exist objectively in the world of particular things and are not just a feature of our way of speaking about such things;

3) **propositionalism** (the contradiction of **objectualism**) – states that there are objective of sentences which are the subjects of modal properties (Thomas Aquinas, Boethius).

Looking into encyclopedias and textbooks (Gallois 1998, pp. 815–817), one can see that the *de re/de dicto* distinction in modern, 20th century philosophical literature concerns many different, but connected theoretical questions. Generally, *de dicto* means "concerning a *dictum*", where a *dictum*

is something that has propositional content – it can be a sentence, a judgment in the logical meaning, and so on. *De re* means "concerning a thing (*re*)" that has some defined properties.

The etymological explanation does not give answers to the philosophical questions because the *de re/de dicto* distinction concerns many theoretical contexts, positions, conceptions, controversies (and so on) which have crystallized in modern philosophy of language, philosophical logic and analytical ontology. I will discuss the most typical of them.

(1) The context of modal logic of quantifiers. By examining the connection between the modal operators and the quantifiers, one can notice a difference, for the illustration of which authors often use parts of the Barcan[1] formula:

1.1 $$\Box(x)\phi x,$$

where $\Box$ is a modal operator and means: "is necessary that" ($\Diamond$ means: "is possible that"), ϕ represents any predicate. In the Barcan formula, 1.2 is the antecedent, 1.1 is the consequent which says: it is the necessary truth (*dictum*) that everything is ϕ. This sentence points to the modality of *de dicto*. The formula:

1.2 $$(x)\Box\phi x$$

states that everything (each one of the things) is necessarily ϕ. It represents the *de re* modality.

This distinction was more precisely defined by Cresswell and Hughes:

> "The α formula, containing the modal operator $\Box$ or $\Diamond$, will be said to express a modality *de re* if there is a scope of some modal operator in it which contains some free occurrence of an individual-variable; otherwise α will be said to express a modality *de dicto*." (Cresswell, Hughes 1968, p. 184).

(2) The context of essentialism, in which the *de re/de dicto* distinction may lead to acknowledging some of the subject's properties as necessary. Recognizing whether a modal sentence containing the subject's name is true or not, may depend on essential properties of the subject. The following example points to the connection between this context and the context of the modal logic of quantifiers. The sentence: "Every man is necessarily a human being" can be represented by a formula in which the necessity operator has the free variable within its reach: $\forall x(Cx \rightarrow \Box Rx)$.

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[1] The Barcan formula has the following form: $(x)\Box\phi x \rightarrow \Box(x)\phi x$.

(3) The context of the dispute is between modal realism and modal nominalism. According to the first of these items, it is maintained that predicates such as: "he is necessarily a human", "possibly, he is tall" express a particular modal kind of property of objectively existing subjects or states of affairs. A modal sentence expresses the modal *de re* predication when it assigns a modal property to subjects or states of affairs. In particular, "John is necessarily a human" expresses the modal *de re* predication towards John.

The opposite, proclaiming the thesis of the linguistic character of modality, here called the modal nominalism, characterizes modality exclusively in terms of a given description. According to this thesis, necessity or possibility do not belong to the order of things or happenings, but to the order of the way of speaking about them. This particularly applies to the semantic argument suggested by Quine (Quine 1953, pp. 139–159; Quine 1976, pp. 185–196; Quine 1979, pp. 268–274) which concerns the reduction of the *de re* to *de dicto* modality.

(4) The context of the dispute between propositionalism and objectualism. The general thesis of propositionalism says that propositions are objective correlations of sentences which are the subjects of modal properties. For example, according to Meinong, objectives are the subjects of modal properties.[2] The main difference between an object and an objective is that the first one is the subject of presentation, while the second one is the subject of judgment. On an ontological level, modality is treated as the property of objectives; on the linguistic level – as the property of judgments (Żegleń 1990, p. 194). Let us add that the equivalents for an objective are "situations" (Wittgenstein), "propositions" (Frege) or "noemats" (Husserl).

By accepting the existence of propositional objects these authors usually also assume a stronger thesis about the non-reduction of *de dicto* modality to *de re*: at least some of the modal properties of propositional existences are non-reducible to the properties of their elements. The modality is completely a property of judgments or states of things, not things or relations.

The thesis of the reduction of *de re* modality to *de dicto* is even stronger: all of the modal properties (of things, features and relations) are reducible to the properties of propositional existences. A representative of this position is Alvin Plantiga, who proposes a method of reducing sentences which con-

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[2] Ingarden proposes that the notion "objective" can be treated as "a intentional state of affairs", R. Ingarden 1972.

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tain *de re* modalities to sentences containing only the *de dicto* modalities. (Cocchiarella 2007, p. 60). One can also encounter the thesis of reduction of the *de re* modality to *de dicto* in the conception of logic atomism.[3]

(5) The context of the rigid designators and the description. Proper names, such as "Napoleon", can be defined as rigid designators, because they designate the same individual in every possible world. One can speak of the *de re* interpretation of a given name when it appears within the reach of the modal operator as the rigid designator. The sentence: "It is possible that Napoleon spoke Chinese" should be interpreted *de re*. However, the sentence: "It is possible that the most famous French general spoke Chinese" should be interpreted *de dicto* (Gallois 1998, pp. 815–817).

By enlarging the range of rigid designators beyond proper names one can read the descriptions in two ways: referential and attributive. The first one refers to the *de re* interpretation the second to the *de dicto* interpretation. The possibilities of these two interpretations are being discussed in modern literature (particularly concerning the so-called Evans modal argument (Evans 1982).

(6) The context of the propositional attitudes theory. A distinction between two kinds of convictions is introduced here (Quine 1976, pp. 185–196). The conviction of the *de dicto* type is understood, according to Frege's conception, as a two-part relation between a person and *dictum*. The *de re* conviction is understood, according to Russell theory, as at least a three-part relation between a person, an object and a property.

Let us consider the following example: "John believes that the leading politicians are wealthy". If this sentence is true, John, without knowing who currently is the president, is convinced that the president of his country is wealthy. Therefore, he has the conviction of the *de dicto* character, consisting in being in a two-place relation with a to *dictum* (an opinion or a judgment).

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[3] Jan Woleński is a supporter of the propositional perception theory with consists in two assumptions: that sentences express judgment, and that observation can be treated as a propositional attitude). According to the theory the content of an observation is always communicated by a sentence. Thus, the sentence "I see Kraków" is treated as logically equivalent to the sentence "I see that this is Kraków". Woleński pays attention to the dual possibility of expressing intentional sentences: in direct and indirect speech. "Indirect speech is opposed to simple or direct speech (*oratio recta*). According to this, sometimes the *de modo recto* and *de modo obliquo* presentations are distinguished. [...] The first ones present their subjects directly, the second are in some way relational, for example by the content mediation." Woleński [2005], pp. 400–40. (translating by author). The relations of cognitive acts (*de modo obliquo*) correspond with the modality of *de dicto*, the cognitive of acts themselves (*de modo recto*) – with the modality of *de re*.

However, let us assume that John meets Barack Obama. From Barack Obama appearance John concludes that he is wealthy. Consequently, John believes in the truth of the sentence: "The current president is wealthy". However, the above-mentioned relation is of a three-place kind and takes place between John, Barack Obama and the property of being wealthy.

In case of the *de re* conviction we speak of the relation enriched with the knowledge about the designate, in the case of the *de dicto* conviction that kind of knowledge is not possessed.

In *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* this is the only interpretation given, which shows its significance in literature. Simon Blackburn characterizes the distinction between two kinds of interpretations of these sentences, which can, however not always must be understood, as referring to a particular thing [...] So, when the truth of my words demands for me to refer to a particular thing with the first interpretation, with the second one it makes me refer first of all to a particular sentence, which truth I would like to wish, and which can become the truth because of many things.

Using predicate calculus, the difference between these interpretations for the sentence: "I want to have a yacht" Blackburn expresses in the following way: (i) "$\exists x(Px \land I$ wish I had $x)$", and (ii) "I wish for this to happen: $(\exists x)(Px \land Mx)$, where P means: "being a yacht", M – "being my property". Galois pays attention to a similar dependence, distinguishing the context of conviction attitudes as the main one.

(7) The context of Montague grammar. For a sentence including a fictional name: "Jack is looking for an unicorn", we can also propose two interpretations: "Jack is looking for an unicorn as a representative of a species" (*de dicto*); and the interpretation: "There exists a particular unicorn which Jack is looking for" (*de re*) (Montague 2002, pp. 29–30). It is assumed here that in case of the *de dicto* intention one can consider any object belonging to a class with a certain property, while in case of *de re* a particular element of that class is considered. These two interpretations became the inspiration for the creation of the PTQ theory by Richard Montague.

II

In the supplement to their SEP article on propositional attitudes, Thomas McKay and Michael Nelson (McKay, Nelson 2005) try to order the vast range of the literature concerning the *de re/de dicto* distinction. They interpret it according to three research perspectives, and suggest suitable definitions. In the first, syntactic presentation, they use the concept of intensional verb range:

Def I:

"A sentence is syntactically *de re* just in case it contains a pronoun or free variable within the scope of an opacity verb that is anaphoric on or bound by a singular term or quantifier outside the scope of that verb. Otherwise, it is *syntactically de dicto*" (McKay, Nelson 2005).

In order to illustrate this definition, they appeal to the following example:

1. Ralph believes that someone is a spy.

According to the Def I, two interpretations of the 1. can be presented. The authors of the entry give the following interpretation:

1' Ralph believes that $\exists x$ (x is a spy),

1" $\exists x$ (Ralph believes, that x is a spy).

They claim that almost everybody believes, like Ralph, that there are spies (like in 1'), whereas only a few believe such particular people are spies (like in 1"). They suggest a paraphrase for 1": "There is someone of whom Ralph thinks that he is a spy".

It is clear that the difference between 1' and 1" concerns the range of the existential quantifier. It has a limited range in 1' (the *de dicto* interpretation); in 1" it has a wide range and binds the variable which is free in the range of the intensional verb (the *de re* interpretation). The authors notice that Def I can be applied both to the alethic and the temporal modality.

Next, they propose a semantic distinction. They use for this purpose the following definition:

Def II:

"A sentence is *semantically de re* just in case it permits substitution *salva veritate*. Otherwise, it is semantically *de dicto*" (McKay, Nelson 2005).

They point out that the semantic distinction was criticized by Quine, who did not permit the possibility of quantifying in referentially opaque contexts.[4] In the open formula 1", the intentional verb "believes" refers to any object whose name is put in the place of the x variable. Quine's famous example concerning **Bel** (believe operator) operators speaks about Ortcutt, whom Ralph treats as a public person of significant importance, for example

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[4] Issues concerning opaque context were considered for the first time by Quine in: Quine [1943].

a mayor. At the same time, one evening he notices a mysterious man standing on the street corner, whose behavior causes the suspicion of espionage. By calling Ortcutt a mayor in the first situation, and a "mysterious man at the street corner" in the second one, the sentence: a) "Ralph is convinced that he (the mysterious man at the street corner) is a spy" is acknowledged to be true, whereas the sentence: b) "Ralph is convinced that the mayor is a spy" is acknowledged to be false. Whether the name "Ortcutt" fulfills the sentence function: "Ralph is convinced about x that x is a spy" depends on the way in which Ortcutt is described.

Quine's conclusion is as follows: It is a nonsense to claim that Ortcutt, irrespective of the description, fulfills (or not) the condition *salva veritate*. In the example of Ralph and Ortcutt, it is not allowed to substitute x for any co-referential name containing "Ortcutt", because the truth value is also dependent on Ralph's knowledge of the dark side of mayor's personality (Quine 1976, pp. 331–333).

I do not agree with Quine thesis; I will show why it is wrong in section 3 when I analyze Kripke's argument.

McKay and Nelson define the so-called metaphysical *de re/de dicto* distinction as follows:

Def III:

"An attribution is metaphysically *de re* with respect to an object **o** just in case it directly attributes a property to **o**. It is metaphysically *de dicto* with respect to **o**, if it indirectly involves **o**, and independent of **o** if it doesn't" (McKay, Nelson, 2005).

As an example they use the sentence: "Sally believes that Bill is happy". Let us assume that Sally has reasons to suppose that everybody who is in Disneyland is happy, and that at the moment there is exactly one person there. Let us consider the following reasoning:

(1) Sally believes that every person in Disneyland is happy.
(2) Bill is the only person in Disneyland.
(3) Sally believes that Bill is happy.

The opponents of the "metaphysical" interpretation of *de re* will not agree with the above reasoning, because they will claim that Sally does not attribute the quality of being happy directly to Bill. Kaplan gives a similar example that concerns Ralph being the shortest spy (Kaplan 1969, pp. 178–214). In a particular group of spies there is one who is the shortest; thought Ralph does not know which one it is. Of course this is not a clear case that indirect attribution needs indirect knowledge about the object or it's possible only by a description, Kaplan takes this problem, claims

that Ralph does not have the *de re* conviction about a particular person. Similarly, Sally does not have the *de re* conviction about Bill.

It should be mentioned that the matter of the analytical relationships between the syntactic, semantic and metaphysical *de re*/*de dicto* distinctions in McKay's and Nelson's review presents as a complex problem.[5] It concerns many issues of linguistic, semiotic, ontological and epistemological character.

I will now analyze the above-mentioned definitions and present their modified versions. First, taking Def I and Def II into consideration, then taking Def III into consideration.

III

The following part of this article will clearly distinguish natural language from the language of logic. In the description of the first one we will use the notion of a sentence in the sense of traditional linguistics, in the second one – the logical idea of a closed formula as an expression in which all of the variables are bound. The set of formalizing functions, which enable us to specify the logical form of natural language sentences, will be used as the translation function from natural language sentences to the language of logical formulas. The symbol "f" will be used to mark any function of that sort. We are assuming that f assigns the expression-token of the natural language to appropriate symbol-token of the logical language. In particular, it assigns the appropriate sentences of natural language to the logical formulas; and it assigns the designators to the names (from the logical language), that is either simple name or descriptions (which are treated as complex naming expressions). In that case, a natural language sentence Z corresponds to a sentence $f(Z)$ in formal sense and the designator t corresponds to the name $f(t)$. Let us notice that if there are any variables in the expressions $f(Z)$ or $f(t)$, they are bound variables.

We will use the language of first-order logic with identity, the description operator, as well as modal and assurance sentence functors. The set of this language's expressions is the counter-domain of formalisation functions.

We assume that the deductive apparatus of this language is a conceivably weak extension of ordinary logical laws and rules on the intensional contexts. Particularly, the rule of the intersubstitutivity of identical elements

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[5] Kallfelz stresses the role of modal pronouns in the context of the *de re*/*de dicto* distinction, Kallfelz [2007] p. 3.

is limited to the extensional functors (it does not apply to the intensional functors).

(i) McKay and Nelson have created Def I and II by relativizing the *de re/de dicto* distinction to the concept of a sentence (in the syntactic sense). For example, by speaking about the *de dicto* modality, they mean the modality in the given sentence. But using the concept of an intensional verb in the definition of this distinction, one encounters a difficulty: how can you speak about a part of speech in terms of syntactic scope?

When defining the scope, it is more appropriate to use the concept of a sentence functor, that is the operator in which at least one of the arguments is a sentence expression. The sentence operator has a narrow scope when there exists, within its reach, a free variable bound outside its scope (the *de re* meaning), or a wide range when there is no free variable bound outside its scope (the *de dicto* meaning) (Hughes, Cresswell 1898, p. 184).

Understanding the operator may in this context leads to a mistake, because one operator may exist in several tokens (for each of them we can speak about their individual scope). This may lead to a situation when while saying something about a particular sentence one does not know which token operator we have in mind.

Let me illustrate this with an example: "Ralph thinks that there is somebody of whom Anna thinks that he is immortal". The intensional functor "thinks" appears in this sentence in two copies, *de dicto* in the first case, *de re* in the second one. Its formal representation is as follows: Ralph-thinks[$\exists x$Anna-thinks[Nx]]. The free variable x (in Anna-thinks[Nx]), standing within the scope of the second appearance of the "thinks" operator, is bound by the existential quantifier standing outside of the scope of this operator. According to Def I, this representation defines the syntactic interpretation *de re* of the sentence in question. However, when the first token of the intensional operator "thinks" is taken into consideration, the part of sentence is interpreted as *de dicto*. It is therefore more appropriate to speak, according to Def I', about the *de re/de dicto* distinction for the formal representations of sentences, not the sentences themselves.

Taking this analysis into account, I suggest the following definition for the syntactic *de re/de dicto* distinction:

Df I' the token of the functor F has in sentence Z *de re* meaning due to the formalization f only when there exists a bound variable free within the $f(Z)$ reach in the $f(Z)$ formula. Otherwise it is *de dicto*.

Let us notice that the syntactic *de re/de dicto* distinction is wide enough to apply also to the extensional operators. Def I, which uses the term of

a token of the sentence operator, allows us to deal with the above mentioned difficulties in reference to intensional operators. Let us see how. Df I' enables the explanation of the difficulties pointed out by Kripke.[6] He gives the example of a multiple complex sentence:

2. Watson doubts that Holmes believes that Smith's murderer is insane.

It is in three ways ambiguous whether the description is given wide, intermediate, or narrow scope:

2' [the x: x murdered Smith]
(Watson doubts that (Holmes believes that (x is insane)))

2'' Watson doubts that ([the x: x murdered Smith])
(Holmes believes that (x is insane)))

2''' Watson doubts that (Holmes believes that ([the x: x murdered Smith]
(x is insane))).

In the light of Df I' resignation from *de dicto/de re* distinction appears to be premature. However, it points out the necessity of speaking about the copies of the operators. Consider example 2) in the above-mentioned interpretations outs the definitions of the syntactic *de re/de dicto* distinctions.

Also, speaking about the semantic interpretation of *de re* or *de dicto* **sentence** (which depends on the *salva veritate* interchangeability of co-referential terms appearing in the sentence) can be confusing. Let us consider a sentence: "Despite the fact that communism was overthrown in Poland, John thinks that communists hold significant power in Poland". Let us assume that the appropriate formal representation of this sentence has the following form: It-was-that[Communism was overthrown in Poland]&John-thinks-that[Communists hold significant power in Poland]. It is easy to notice that the proper name "Poland" is exchangeable *salva veritate* within the scope of the temporal operator "It-was-that" with any co-referential expression (e.g. "country on the Vistula River"), in contrast with the intentional operator John-thinks-that (John may not know that Poland is the country situated by the Vistula River).

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[6] Kripke, S. A. "Speakers Reference and Semantics Reference", Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language, Minneapolis Univeristy of Minesota Press p. 6–27.

Therefore, one constant may have *de re* meaning, while another one *de dicto* meaning in part of sentence Z.

This analysis indicates quite clearly a need for the relativisation of the semantic interpretation of *de re/de dicto* to the concept of the type of the operator in the given language, and not – as presented by McKay and Nelson – to the concept of a sentence.

Let us accept a definition thanks to which we will be able to deal with the sentences containing two or more intentional operators of different types.

Df II' the designator t has the *de re* meaning in the sentence Z relatively to the f formalization only when the name $f(t)$ is interchangeable with any co-referential name in $f(Z)$ *salva veritate*. Otherwise it is *de dicto*.

Taking into consideration the assumption of the rule of *salva veritate* exchangeability limitation, this definition equals the following expression: the t designator has in the sentence Z the *de dicto* meaning due to the f formalization only if the name $f(t)$ exists within the reach of a given intensional functor in/inside $f(Z)$; otherwise it is *de re*.

Let me illustrate the application of Df I' and Df II' with appropriate examples:

Let Z = "There exists a man whom Adam considers to be a genius", and let $f(Z)$ be a formula: $\exists x \mathbf{Bel}_a[Gx]$. In this meaning, according to Df' and Df II', there exist expressions: "considers" and "Adam" in the Z sentence (*de dicto* or *de re*)?

In the Z sentence the expression "considers" exists in the *de re* meaning, because in the $f(Z)$ formula there is a bound x variable free within the reach of $f(\text{"considers"}) = \mathbf{Bel}$. The designator "Adam", existing in Z, has the *de re* meaning when within the $f(Z)$ formula the constant $f(\text{"Adam"})$ is exchangeable *salva veritate* with any co-referential name constant.

(ii) The so-called metaphysical definition (Def III) speaks of the directness and indirectness of attributing properties to a given object. For an explanation of this difference, I will now come back to the example mentioned before. Let us assume that Sally believes Bill is happy. Can you say that Bill has the property of being the object of Sally's belief that he is happy? Even when assuming that Sally has reasons to suppose that there is exactly one person in Disneyland and that everybody who is in that place is happy, she has the *de dicto*, not the *de re* point of view (because she does not imagine any particular person, for example Bill).

It is known that the metaphysical relation of assigning properties to an object differs from the pragmatic relation of ascribing the properties to an object (by the subject). The so-called "metaphysical *de re/de dicto*" concerns of course the second of these relations. Definition III introdu-

ced by McKay and Nelson, can therefore be confusing. Because of this we will use here a more adequate definition, "the pragmatic distinction of *de re/de dicto*".

The pragmatic distinction applies to the way the designators (the denoting expressions are ressed) – the designator is used *de re* when its designation is directly given to the user in a defined context, otherwise it is used *de dicto*. These ways of using the designators may change in different sentence contexts, therefore not only is it necessary to relativise the concept of a person (the user), but also to the concept of a sentence in the distinction's definition. Finally, one can propose the following definition:

Df III':

The sentence Z expresses the *de re* conviction of the object x with the f formalization only if in the $f(Z)$ formula there exists a simple name of the object x. The sentence Z expresses the *de dicto* conviction of the object x with the f formalization only if in $f(Z)$ there exists a single sentence function, fulfilled only by x.

According to the Df III', the sentence Z: "Bill is happy" expresses the *de re* conviction about Bill, because the name Bill $f(\text{"Bill"})$ exists in $f(Z)$ and it is a simple name. However, the sentence: "Each person in the Disneyland is happy" expresses the *de dicto* conviction about Bill, because Bill is the only person fulfilling the single sentence function "Dx" in the formula $f(Z) =$ "For each $x(Dx \rightarrow Hx)$".

IV

According to the accepted definitions, one should clearly distinguish three semiotic concepts of *de re* and, suitably, three concepts of *de dicto*: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Each of them played an essential role in modern philosophy, especially in discussions on the subject of the language philosophy.

It is not the sentence's category that is the range of the defined concepts, but the suitable semiotic categories, connected with appropriate relativisations. And so, the syntactic *de re* interpretation concerns the **operator** (this interpretation is relative to the syntactic concept of a sentence), the semantic – **designator** (this interpretation is relatives to the semantic concept of a language), and the pragmatic – **conviction of the object** (this interpretation is relative to the concepts of a sentence and an object).

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