De Se Attitudes

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the philosophical and linguistic issues raised by *de se* attitudes. After discussing a version of the problem of *de se* attitudes, I examine three influential theories of *de se* attitudes, while also considering the possibility of retaining a more conservative view. I close by discussing some of the further significance of *de se* attitudes for philosophy and linguistics.

Keywords: propositional attitudes, *de se* attitudes, propositions, propositional attitude reports, Frege's Puzzle, the explanation of action

Key points:

- *De se* attitudes are first-person thoughts.

- While Frege cases do not necessarily reveal something distinctive about *de se* attitudes, reflecting on cases in which two agents agree on everything relevant shows that which shareable, absolute propositions an agent believes does not determine what they believe *de se*.

- *De se* attitudes play an important role in the explanation of action.

- The grammar of natural language is sensitive to the distinction between *de se* and non-*de se* attitudes, insofar as certain attitude reports are true only if the subject of the report has an appropriate *de se* attitude.

1   Introduction

A *de se* attitude is a first-person thought, a psychological attitude that one could express or report using an appropriate sentence containing a first-person singular pronoun.[1] For example, the belief I could express by saying, "I am

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[1]*De se* attitudes are sometimes called "self-locating attitudes" or "indexical attitudes". These terms are sometimes taken to also include attitudes that one could express or report using an appropriate sentence containing a locative indexical (e.g. "here") or a temporal indexical (e.g. "now").

ecstatic" is a *de se* belief, and the hope I could report by saying, "I hope that I win the race" is a *de se* hope. *De se* attitudes appear to be special in various ways, and their special features have been used to motivate a number of novel theories of attitudes, such as the those defended by John Perry [Perry, 1977, 1979] and David Lewis [Lewis, 1979]. Furthermore, it appears that certain attitude reports are true only if the subject of the report has an appropriate *de se* attitude, and so it seems that the grammar of natural language is sensitive to the distinction between *de se* and non-*de se* attitudes. While I discuss both of these issues below, my focus here is on the the significance of the *de se* for foundational issues in the philosophy of language.

2 The problem of *de se* attitudes

Sometime in 2012, an undercover British police officer was examining an area of Sussex that had recently suffered a spate of burglaries. In the course of his investigation, the officer was alerted by CCTV operators that he was in close proximity to a suspect. He subsequently chased this suspect for more than 20 minutes before someone in the CCTV control room recognized that 'the suspect' visible on the CCTV monitors was in fact the officer himself. The officer had been chasing himself the whole time, though he of course did not realize this.[Parris-Long, 2012]

Suppose that, before the amusing error came to light, the officer had a belief he could express by saying, "The man seen by the CCTV operators looks suspicious" without having the belief he could express by saying, "I look suspicious." Both beliefs (were he to have them) would be beliefs about himself, but only the second would be a *de se* belief. Cases like this nicely illustrate the difference between a *de se* belief and a *de re* belief that merely happens to be about oneself.

Much of the early literature on *de se* attitudes focussed on hypothetical cases similar in structure to the foregoing actual case.[2] The cases in question feature a subject who thinks of themselves in two different ways without realizing it, where one of these 'ways of thinking' is a *de se* way of thinking. But as some of the more recent literature on these topics has emphasized, it isn't entirely clear that reflecting on such cases reveals anything distinctive about *de se* attitudes *per se*. For, going back to Frege [1892], the philosophical literature on attitudes has been aware of the possibility that a thinker might think about the same object in two different ways without realizing it. One may know of a planet under the name "Hesperus" and one may know of a planet under the name "Phosphorus", without realizing that Hesperus is Phosphorus. The case of the Sussex police officer has a similar structure: the officer knew of himself in a first-person way and knew of himself under the description "the man visible on the CCTV monitors", but he failed to realize that *he* was the man visible on the CCTV monitors. 'Frege cases' are known to pose challenges to philosophical theories of attitudes, but it is not clear whether *de se* Frege cases pose some

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[2]Castañeda [1966, 1967, 1968], Perry [1977, 1979], Lewis [1979].

additional challenge, some challenge that we couldn't see by simply considering cases of the Hesperus-Phosphorus variety.[3]

These observations have lead some philosophers to be skeptical that the category of *de se* attitudes has any special philosophical significance.[4] But, as Stalnaker [1999, 20-22] first observed, there is another type of example that suggests that there is indeed something special about *de se* attitudes. The examples Stalnaker pointed to are not Frege cases, since they do not require anyone to be ignorant of an identity statement; they are, rather, cases involving "different believers who know the ways that they are differently situated, but who, in one sense, do not differ in what they believe" [Stalnaker, 1999, 20-21]. That is, the cases are ones in which a pair of agents agree on everything relevant (and so, in that sense, do not differ in what they believe), even though the agents have different *de se* beliefs. I will describe one such example presently, but first it will be useful to say a bit more about what I shall call the "standard view of attitudes".[5]

According to the standard view, the relation of believing is a two-place relation between a believer and an abstract object called a "content". It is, furthermore, an important feature of the standard view that contents are *absolute propositions*, i.e. that one and the same content cannot be true for one person and false for another. A third feature of the standard view is that contents are *public* or *shareable*: in general, if you can believe a given content p, then so can I, and indeed it is possible for us to both believe p in the same situation.[6]

The issue Stalnaker raises for the standard view can be seen by imagining two people, Albert and Betty [Stalnaker, 2016, 70]. Albert is in the kitchen and Betty is in the basement. Each of them knows who and where they are, and knows who and where the other is—there is no relevant *de se* ignorance.[7] Indeed, there need be no (relevant) identity statement of which either person is ignorant, and so the case is not a Frege case. Furthermore, let us suppose that Albert and Betty agree on everything that is at all relevant to their situation. That is, for each relevant proposition p, Albert believes p iff Betty believes p. The shareability of propositions means that this is possible, at least in principle. So according to the standard view, there is no relevant difference in what Albert and Betty believe. But it is natural to think that there is a difference in what they believe *de se*. For it is natural to say that while Albert takes himself to be in the kitchen, Betty does not—she takes herself to be in the basement. But

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[3]See Cappelen and Dever [2013], Magidor [2015], Ninan [2016, 2020], Shaw [2019] for discussion.

[4]'*De se* skeptics' include Boer and Lycan [1980], Stalnaker [1981], Millikan [1990], Tiffany [2000], Spencer [2007], Cappelen and Dever [2013], Devitt [2013], Douven [2013], and Magidor [2015]. For responses to *de se* skepticism, see Ninan [2016, 2020], Torre [2018], and Shaw [2019].

[5]See also Perry [1979], Ninan [2016, 2020].

[6]These last two constraints on the nature of contents might be motivated by considering the role contents play in the characterization of agreement, i.e. in the characterization of what it is for two or more thinkers to agree on something.

[7]Throughout this entry, I use "they" as both a third-person plural pronoun and a third-person singular gender-neutral pronoun, allowing context to disambiguate. I use "themself" as the reflexive form of the latter.

this difference is not reflected in a difference in the propositions they believe.[8]

Here is one way to bring out the point. Consider the state σ of believing all and only the propositions that Albert and Betty both believe. Let x be an individual in this state. Where does x take themself to be, in the kitchen or in the basement? This question is unanswerable, since both Albert and Betty are in this state, and yet Albert takes himself to be in kitchen while Betty takes herself to be in the basement. That difference between them is not reflected in this way of representing total states of belief. These states of 'taking oneself to be thus-and-so' are *de se* beliefs: Albert's belief is one he could express by saying, "I am in the kitchen". Thus, it appears that, on the standard view, which propositions an individual believes does not determine what they believe *de se*. For Albert and Betty believe precisely the same propositions and yet differ in what they believe *de se*.

3 Theories of *de se* attitudes

Broadly speaking, there are three influential views of *de se* attitudes, each of which can be seen as offering a response to Stalnaker's example. Each view also revises one of the three tenets of the standard view.

The first view is the one taken by Frege, who denied that all propositions are shareable. In particular, he maintained that the content of a *de se* attitude can be grasped by at most one agent:

> Now everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no-one else. So, when Dr. Lauben thinks that he has been wounded, he will probably take as a basis this primitive way in which he is presented to himself. And only Dr. Lauben himself can grasp thoughts [i.e propositions] determined in this way. [Frege, 1918/1956, 298]

Exactly why Frege adopted this view is an important question, but we set it aside here. Instead, we observe that Frege's move allows him to respond to Stalnaker's example by denying the possibility that Albert and Betty believe exactly the same propositions, given that (e.g.) Albert believes *de se* that he is in kitchen. On Frege's view, the content of Albert's *de se* belief is a proposition p_a that only Albert can believe. When we learn that some individual x believes p_a, we thereby learn that x is Albert, and that x has a *de se* belief to the effect that he is in the kitchen. Thus, it is not possible for Albert and Betty to be in precisely the same total belief state, given what each of them is stipulated to believe. Note that, unlike the standard view, Frege's view is consistent with the claim that what one believes *de se* is determined by which propositions one believes.[9]

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[8]The 'bear attack' case discussed in Perry [1977, 23] has a similar structure to Stalnaker's case. But Perry uses that case primarily to illustrate his preferred theory rather than to show what is problematic about the standard view.

[9]For discussion of Frege's view, see Perry [1977], Burge [1979], Evans [1981], and Kripke [2008].

The second view is the one taken by Lewis, who denies that contents, the objects of belief, are absolute propositions [Lewis, 1979].[10] Rather, on Lewis's view, contents are properties, objects that may vary in truth-value across individuals. To believe a property P is to self-ascribe it, i.e. to believe *de se* that one has P. In order to see how Lewis might interpret Stalnaker's example, it helps to note that some properties can go proxy for propositions: given a proposition p, the corresponding *boring property* P is a property that an individual x has in world w just in case p is true in w.[11] Given suitable assumptions, there will be a one-to-one correspondence between propositions and boring properties. When we said that Albert and Betty agree on everything that is relevant to their situation, Lewis may understand this as saying that they believe all the same boring properties. But on Lewis's picture, two agents can believe all the same boring properties, while differing as to which 'non-boring' properties they self-ascribe. Thus, Lewis will say that while Albert self-ascribes the property of being in the kitchen, Betty instead self-ascribes the property of being in the basement. For Lewis, this amounts to a difference in what Albert and Betty believe *de se*. So on Lewis's picture, what one believes *de se* is not determined by which boring properties one self-ascribes, for Albert and Betty may self-ascribe all the same boring properties while differing in what they believe *de se*. This is the analogue in Lewis's system of the claim that which propositions one believes does not determine what one believes *de se*.

The third view—a view often associated with John Perry—denies that the relation of believing is a two-place relation between a believer and a content [Perry, 1977, 1979]. Rather, the relation of believing is a three-place relation between a believer, a content, and a third object, often called a "guise". Contents are understood to be shareable, absolute propositions, but guises are instead understood to be properties.[12] Thus, when Albert believes that he is in the kitchen, the content of his belief is a certain proposition, but he believes that proposition under a certain guise, a guise which might be identified with the property of being in the kitchen. *Contra* Frege, Betty can believe this same proposition, though if she does, she will believe it under a different guise, a guise which might be identified with the property of being such that one's housemate is in the kitchen. The fact that Albert and Betty agree on everything relevant is here represented by the fact that for each relevant proposition p, Albert believe p under some guise iff Betty believes p under some guise. The fact that they differ in what they believe *de se* is represented by the fact that, for some proposition p they both believe (e.g. the proposition that Albert is in the kitchen), Albert believes p under some guise P (e.g. the property of being in the kitchen) while Betty believes it under some distinct guise P' (e.g. the property of being such that one's housemate is in the kitchen), where P and P' are non-boring properties.

I will not try to adjudicate between these three views here. Instead, I want to briefly mention the possibility of retaining the standard view even in the

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[10]See also Chisholm [1976].

[11]The notion of a boring property is due to Egan [2006].

[12]See also Kaplan [1989].

face of Stalnaker's example. For we need to be careful about what exactly Stalnaker's example shows. What it shows is that what one believes *de se* is not determined by which shareable, absolute propositions one believes. But this leaves it open that the facts about which propositions one believes along with certain additional facts *together* determine what one believes *de se*. There are various alternatives for what these additional facts might be, but let me briefly sketch one picture.

Suppose that believing is a two-place relation between an agent and an absolute proposition, and suppose further that there is a proposition k_a such that, necessarily, Albert believes k_a iff Albert believes *de se* that he is in the kitchen. Note two things about this proposition k_a. First, nothing would appear to prevent us from maintaining that k_a is a shareable proposition. For example, both Albert and Betty might both believe this proposition in Stalnaker's scenario. For Albert to believe it is for him to believe *de se* that he is in the kitchen. For Betty to believe it is, presumably, for her to believe (perhaps in some particular way) that Albert is in the kitchen.[13] The second thing to note is that if we are told that x believes k_a, we may not be able to conclude anything about what x believes *de se*—in particular we are not able to determine whether or not x believes *de se* that they are in the kitchen. But if we are given the additional information that x is Albert, we *can* conclude that x believes *de se* that they are in the kitchen. On this picture, facts about which propositions one believes together with facts about who one is may jointly determine what one believes *de se*. Moreover, on this view, believing is a two-place relation between an agent and a shareable, absolute proposition, and so this view leaves the standard view intact. Of course, more needs to be said about this view; we would want to know more about the nature of propositions like k_a.[14] But the possibility of such a view should be appealing to those sympathetic to the standard view.

4 The significance of *de se* attitudes

The lesson we took from Stalnaker's example is that what one believes *de se* is not determined by which shareable, absolute propositions one believes. That is an interesting feature of *de se* attitudes, but the interest in this class of attitudes goes beyond this observation.

One feature of *de se* attitudes that philosophers have emphasized concerns their significance for the explanation of rational action. Two hikers, a and b, are on a trail, when a bear begins to charge towards a.[15] The fact that a takes themself to be the one being chased by the bear helps to explain why they curl up into a ball. The fact that b takes themself to be the one whose hiking partner is being chased by a bear helps to explain why b instead runs

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[13]Note that nothing has yet be said about what exactly it is for Betty to believe k_a. Note, in particular, that we have not said that if Betty has a belief she could express by saying "Albert is in the kitchen", then Betty believes k_a.

[14]See Caie and Ninan (Forthcoming) for a more detailed exploration of views of this type. For related views, see Moss [2012] and Stalnaker [2011, 2016].

[15]The example is from Perry [1977].

for help. The difference in what *a* and *b* each believe *de se* helps to explain why they act differently. Note that if, as on the standard view, propositions are shareable and absolute, then this difference in what the two believe *de se* need not be accompanied by a difference in the propositions they respectively believe. Thus, facts about which propositions one believes (and desires) would presumably not suffice to explain why one acts as they do, since such facts do not determine what one believes (and desires) *de se*.

De se attitudes have also played an important role in contemporary linguistic semantics. At least since Chierchia [1989], semanticists have argued that some natural language attitude reports are true only if the subject of the report has an appropriate *de se* attitude. One example of this in English involves attitude verbs that take non-finite complement clauses. To appreciate the point, consider the following scenario:

> John, a candidate in the upcoming local election, is watching TV while completely intoxicated. He watches the speeches of various candidates, and is mesmerized by one particularly charismatic speaker. He thinks that this candidate is sure to win. The candidate is none other than John himself, but because he is so intoxicated he doesn't realize that he is the candidate making the speech. In fact, he is rather pessimistic about his own prospects and thinks to himself, *I'm not going to win the election.*

Now consider the following pair of sentences:

(1) (a) John expects that he will win the election.
     (b) John expects to win the election.

A standard observation is that while (1a) appears to have a true reading in this scenario, (1b) is unambiguously false. In order for (1b) to be true, John would need to have the *de se* expectation that he himself will win, i.e. he would need to think, *I'm going to win the election.* Thus, it appears that (1b) is true only if John has an appropriate *de se* expectation—"expects" + NON-FINITE CLAUSE forces a *de se* interpretation.

The variety of attitude reports that require the subject of the report to have an appropriate *de se* attitude turns to be surprisingly wide, particularly when one looks across a broad range of languages. A rich literature on these topics reveals an impressive variety of different expressions and constructions that natural languages employ to generate *de se* attitude reports.[16] Semantic theories of such reports are often built atop a philosophical theory of *de se* attitudes. In particular, Lewis's theory of *de se* attitudes has played a foundational role in this literature. A standard semantic theory of (1b), for example, would aim to predict that that sentence is true iff the content of John's expectation is the property of winning the election.

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[16]See, for example, Chierchia [1989], Percus and Sauerland [2003], Schlenker [2003], Anand and Nevins [2004], Anand [2006], Ninan [2008, 2010], Maier [2011], Pearson [2015], Deal [2020].

5   Conclusion

De se attitudes have long been thought to pose a problem for philosophical theories of attitudes, though just what that problem is has not always been clear. I have suggested that the best approach to this issue is to focus on the type of cases that Stalnaker highlights, rather than on Frege cases. In 'Stalnaker cases', we are presented with two agents who believe all the same shareable, absolute propositions, and yet differ in what they believe *de se*. The minimal conclusion to draw from this is that what an agent believes *de se* is not determined by which propositions they believe. A number of well-known views can be seen as responses to this problem, though we noted that it may be possible to accommodate Stalnaker's observation within a suitable version of the standard view. But the interest of *de se* attitudes goes beyond this particular issue. As we noted in the last section, *de se* attitudes appear to play an important role in the explanation of action, and in the semantics of natural language attitude reports.

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