# Attitudes and the Self

Dilip Ninan, dilip.ninan@tufts.edu

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## 1. Introduction

Two views:

- *De se exceptionalism*: *De se* attitudes pose a distinctive problem for otherwise plausible theories of propositions and attitudes.
- *De se skepticism*: There is no distinctive problem of *de se* attitudes; any problem posed by such attitudes is simply an instance of a more general problem.

The orthodox theory of attitudes:

I. *Attitude relations* (e.g. the relation of believing) are two-place relations between an agent and a proposition.

Given an attitude relation $R$ and a proposition $p$, we have the property of bearing $R$ to $p$. Such properties are *attitudes*. For example, the belief that snow is white is the property of believing that snow is white.

Some terminology:

- $p$ is the *content* of the property of believing $p$.
- Beliefs are *individuated by their contents* in the sense that, for any beliefs $B$ and $B'$, $B = B'$ iff the content of $B$ is identical to the content of $B'$.

(The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for attitudes other than belief.)

II. Propositions are *absolute*, i.e. they do not vary in truth value across individuals.

III. Propositions are *shareable*, i.e. if an agent $x$ can entertain a proposition, then generally speaking, so can any other agent $y$.

IV. Attitudes are *fine-grained*. This means, among other things, that:

> If a rational agent $x$ understands sentences $\phi$ and $\phi'$ and accepts $\phi$ and rejects $\phi'$, then the belief that (were she to have it) $x$ could express by uttering $\phi$ is distinct from the belief that (were she to have it) $x$ could express by uttering $\phi'$.

V. Law-like generalizations that link attitudes with actions play a central role in the explanation and prediction of rational action.

I interpret Thesis (V) as entailing two things:

(1) The canonical way of arriving at the prediction that agent $x$ will perform action $\phi$ is as follows:

- The predictor knows a **particular claim**:
  - (a) Agent $x$ has attitudes $A_1, ..., A_n$.
- The predictor knows a **law-like generalization**:
  - (b) Necessarily, for all $y$, if $y$ has attitudes $A_1, ..., A_n$, then, if all else is equal, $y$ will perform action $\phi$.

- And from these two things, the predictor infers:

  (c) If all else is equal, $x$ will perform $\phi$

(2) If there is a rationalizing explanation of the fact that $x$ performed $\phi$, then that explanation consists of:

- A **particular claim**, $x$ has attitudes $A_1, ..., A_n$, and
- a **law-like generalization**,
  Necessarily, for all $y$, if $y$ has attitudes $A_1, ..., A_n$, then, if all else is equal, $y$ will perform action $\phi$.

Comments:

- The orthodox theory, in virtue of being committed to thesis (V) is committed to these two claims.
- 'Canonical way' and 'rationalizing explanation.'
  - Nagel once imagined a man conditioned to put a coin into a pencil sharpener whenever: he believes that there is a pencil sharpener in reach, and he wants to drink some water.
  - You can predict that his man will put a coin into a pencil sharpener, but the way you arrive at this prediction is not the canonical way.
  - You can explain why this man put a coin into a pencil sharpener, but the explanation does not *rationalize* his behavior, i.e. it does not display his behavior as rational given his beliefs and desires.
- All else is not equal if the agent is irrational, suffers from weakness of will, cannot perform the action in question.

## 2. The problem of *de se* attitudes

The problem takes the form of a *reductio* against the orthodox theory.

Imagine that Al and Betty are walking in the woods when a bear begins to chase Al.

Al's attitudes:

- *If I curl up into a ball, the bear will leave. B*
- *I want the bear to leave. D*

Shareability:

- According to thesis (I), belief $B$ is the property of believing $p$, for some proposition $p$.
- According to thesis (III), proposition $p$ is shareable, which means Betty can believe it.
- But if Betty can believe $p$, she can have belief $B$, since belief $B$ is just the property of believing $p$
- The same goes for desire $D$: Betty can have desire $D$.
- Let us suppose that she has belief $B$ and desire $D$.

What did we just suppose? What is it for Betty to have these attitudes?

Absoluteness:

- According to thesis (II), propositions are absolute, i.e. propositions are true or false *simpliciter*.

- This means that we can also say that *beliefs* are true or false *simpliciter*: a belief is true iff its content is true.

  And we can say that desires are satisfied or not satisfied *simpliciter*: a desire is satisfied iff its content is true.

- Since $B$ is a belief that Al can express by saying, *If I curl up into a ball, the bear will leave*, $B$ is true iff: if Al curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.

- Thus, for Betty to have belief $B$ is for Betty to have a belief that is true iff: if Al curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.

- Parallel reasoning shows that for Betty to have desire $D$ is for Betty to have a desire that is satisfied iff the bear leaves.

What is it for Betty to have $B$?

- But knowing the conditions under which a belief is true doesn't tell us exactly what it is for Betty to have belief $B$.

- For here are some beliefs that Betty could have that are true iff: if Al curls up into a ball, the bear will leave:

  - *If **you** curl up into a ball, the bear will leave.* (speaking to Al)
  - *If **Al** curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.*
  - *If **the actual man in the red hat** curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.*

- Given thesis (IV) (fine-grainedness), these are all distinct beliefs. Betty could have one without having the others.

- So which one is $B$?

- I think it is most plausible, from the point of the view of the orthodox theory, that what it is for Betty to have $B$ is for Betty to have the *you*-belief.

- I will assume this in what follows, but my argument does not actually depend on this assumption. This is an important point, and I return to it below.

- I assume that for Betty to have $D$ is for her to have a desire she could report by saying, *I want the bear to leave.*

Betty's attitudes:

- *If you curl up into a ball, the bear will leave.* $B$

- *I want the bear to leave.* $D$

Prediction:

- What will Al do?

- Well, he believes that if he curls up into a ball, the bear will leave, and he wants the bear to leave.

- So if all else is equal, Al will curl up into a ball.

How did we arrive at this prediction?

- Given thesis (V), our prediction is presumably based on a particular claim about Al's attitudes and a law-like generalization linking those attitudes to the action of curling up into ball.

- But all we know about Al is that he has belief $B$ and desire $D$. This is presumably the particular claim on which our prediction is based.
- But then the generalization on which our prediction is based must be this:

  (*) Necessarily, for all $y$, if $y$ has belief $B$ and desire $D$, then if all else is equal, $y$ will curl up into a ball.
- I take that, given thesis (V) and the facts of the case, the orthodox theory is committed to (*).
- For the orthodox theory is committed to the idea that predictions of this sort are based on generalizations. But what could the relevant generalization be other than (*)?

But (*) is false (given what the orthodox theory says about what it is for Betty to have belief $B$):

- It is easy to imagine a possible situation in which Betty has belief $B$ and desire $D$, all else is equal, but Betty does not curl up into a ball.
- Just imagine a situation in which Betty has the following attitudes:
  - *If you curl up into a ball, the bear will leave.* $B$
  - *I want the bear to leave.* $D$
  - *If I fire a warning shot, the bear will leave.*
- Surely there is a situation in which Betty has all of these attitudes, all else is equal, and in which Betty fires a warning shot and doesn't curl up into a ball.
- If so, then (*) is false.
- Since the orthodox theory is committed to (*), it too must be false.

What is it for Betty to have belief $B$?

- I've been assuming that what it is for Betty to have $B$ is for Betty to have a belief that she could express by saying to Al, *If you curl up into a ball, the bear will leave.*
- But, as I noted, the orthodox theory *per se* isn't committed to that; it is only committed to the claim that what it is for Betty to have $B$ is for Betty to have a belief that is true iff: if Al curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.
- And there are many beliefs like that:
  - *If* ***you*** *curl up into a ball, the bear will leave.* (speaking to Al)
  - *If* ***Al*** *curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.*
  - *If* ***the actual man in the red hat*** *curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.*
- But although I was assuming that what it is for Betty to have $B$ is for her to have the first of these beliefs, the argument doesn't depend on that.
- Pick any belief on this list – pick any belief that Betty could have that is true iff: if Al curls up, the bear will leave.
- If you combine the fact that Betty has that belief with the fact that Betty wants the bear to leave, we'll run into the same problem. For knowing those two facts doesn't lead us to predict that Betty will curl up into a ball.
- This point is important and I will return to it below.

### 3. A skeptical reply

The revised theory: theses (I), (III)–(V), and:

(II′) The contents of *de dicto* attitudes are *absolute*, but the contents of *de se* attitudes are *relative*, things that vary in truth value across individuals.

The revised theory avoids the foregoing problem:

- The revised theory denies that what it is for Betty to have belief $B$ is for her to have a belief that is true iff: if Al curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.
- According to the revised theory, what it is for Betty to have belief $B$ is for her to believe *de se* that if *she* curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.

The skeptic's strategy:

- Argue that *de dicto* attitudes pose essentially the same problem for the revised theory that *de se* attitudes posed for the orthodox theory.
- The exceptionalist can't reply that the problem the skeptic raises for the revised theory is somehow really due to *de se* attitudes, because the exceptionalist – or this exceptionalist, at any rate – is conceding that the revised theory resolves the problem of *de se* attitudes.
- So if the skeptic can show that *de dicto* attitudes pose a parallel problem for the revised theory, she will have rebutted my argument in favor of exceptionalism.

The skeptic's case against the revised theory:

Carl's attitudes:

- *Mark Twain is buried in Elmira.* $B'$
- *I want to visit Mark Twain's grave.* $D'$

According to the revised theory:

- Diane can have belief $B'$ and belief $D'$.

  (From thesis (III), shareability.)
- What it is for Diane to have $B'$ is for her to have a belief that is true iff Mark Twain is buried in Elmira.

  (From thesis (II)′, which says that the contents of *de dicto* attitudes are absolute.)
- What it is for Diane to have $D'$ is for her to have a desire that she could report by saying, *I want to visit Mark Twain's grave.*

  (From thesis (II)′, which says that the contents of *de se* attitudes are relative.)

What is it for Diane to have $B'$?

- The revised theory only tells us something about the truth conditions of $B'$. But knowing the conditions under which a belief is true doesn't tell us exactly what it is for Diane to have belief $B'$.
- For here are some beliefs that Diane could have that are true iff: Mark Twain is buried in Elmira:

  (i′) ***Samuel Clemens*** *is buried in Elmira.*

(ii′) ***Mark Twain*** *is buried in Elmira.*

(iii′) ***The actual author of*** **Huckleberry Fin** *is buried in Elmira.*

... ...

- Given thesis (IV) (fine-grainedness), these are all distinct beliefs. Diane could have one without having the others.
- The skeptic notes that it is consistent with the revised theory that what it is for Diane to have $B'$ is for her to have a belief she could express by saying, *Samuel Clemens is buried in Elmira.*
- For this belief has the appropriate truth-conditions.
- So the skeptic assumes that this is what it is for Diane to have $B'$.

Diane's attitudes:

- *Samuel Clemens is buried in Elmira.*
- *I want to visit Mark Twain's grave.*

Prediction and generalization:

- What will Carl do? If all else is equal, he will go to Elmira.
- How did we arrive at that prediction? Given thesis (V), we must have inferred it from the particular claim that Carl has belief $B'$ and desire $D'$, and the generalization (†):

  (†) Necessarily, for all $y$, if $y$ has belief $B'$ and desire $D'$, then if all else is equal, $y$ will curl up into a ball.

- I take that, given thesis (V) and the facts of the case, the revised theory is committed to (†).

But (†) is false:

- Given what it is for Diane to have belief $B'$ and desire $D'$, there is a possible situation in which she has belief $B'$ and desire $D'$, all else is equal, and she does not go to Elmira.
- Just imagine a situation in which Diane has the following attitudes:
  - *Samuel Clemens is buried in Elmira.* $B'$
  - *I want to visit Mark Twain's grave.* $D'$
  - *Mark Twain is buried in Poughkeepsie.*
- Surely there is a situation in which Diane has all of these attitudes, all else is equal, and in which Diane goes to Poughkeepsie rather than Elmira.
- If so, (†) is false.
- Since the revised theory is committed to (†), the revised theory is false.

## 4. Reply to the reply

A feature of Al's *de se* belief:

- Consider a list of all the beliefs that Betty could possess that have the same truth-conditions as Al's belief:

  (i) *If **you** curl up into a ball, the bear will leave.* (speaking to Al)

  (ii) *If **Al** curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.*

  (iii) *If **the actual man in the red hat** curls up into a ball, the bear will leave.*

  ... ...

- It seems that there is *no* belief on this list that, when combined with Betty's desire that the bear leave, will lead Betty to curl up into a ball.

- There is no belief that Betty could have that is (a) truth-conditionally equivalent to Al's belief, and (b) that is also *functionally/nomologically* equivalent to Al's belief.

Carl's *de dicto* belief does not have this feature:

- Consider a list of all the beliefs Diane could possess that have the same truth-conditions as Carl's belief:

  (i′) ***Samuel Clemens** is buried in Elmira.*

  (ii′) ***Mark Twain** is buried in Elmira.*

  (iii′) ***The actual author of* Huckleberry Fin** *is buried in Elmira.*

  ... ...

- Here it seems that *there is* a belief on this list that, when combined with Diane's desire to see Mark Twain's grave, would lead her to go to Elmira – the second belief on this list is just such a belief.

- Thus, there is a belief that Diane could possess that is *both* truth-conditionally equivalent *and* functionally/nomologically equivalent to Carl's belief.

The difference between the two arguments:

- The advocate of the revised theory can reply to the skeptic by saying: what it is for Diane to have belief $B'$ is for her to have belief (ii)′ on the above list.

  But if that is what it is for Diane to have $B'$, it is no longer clear that we have a counterexample to (†). This blocks the skeptic's argument against the revised theory.

- No parallel reply is open to the advocate of the orthodox theory.

  For pick any belief $(n)$ on the list (i), (ii), (iii),.... Assume that what it is for Betty to have $B$ is for her to have belief $(n)$. We still get a counterexample to $(\star)$.

In my view, this is an important difference between *de se* and *de dicto* attitudes:

- There are cases in which an agent $x$ possesses a token *de se* attitude $a$ and in which there is no token attitude $a'$ that an agent $y \neq x$ could possess which is both truth-conditionally equivalent to $a$ and nomologically equivalent to $a$.

- There do not seem to be similar *de dicto* cases.