

A Remark on Attitudes De Dicto and De Se

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Abstract

This is a two-fold response to the theory of attitudes presented by David Lewis in his paper *Attitudes De Dicto and De Se*. Lewis' theory is on the specification of attitudes. On the one hand, it is obvious in his text that Lewis attempts to specify the objects of attitudes uniformly. I will argue that the attempt fails. The reason is that from Lewis' formulation of an attitude, we cannot read the object of it. On the other hand, Lewis' account could have been a theory on the specification of attitudes without any commitment on what the objects of attitudes are. I will argue that this does not hold either. In order to do that, I will construct pairs of cases in which the attitude in one case has the same formulization as in the other case according to Lewis' theory. I will argue that in one such pair of cases, the *focus* of the attitude in one case can be different from that in the other, while the Lewisian theory of attitudes does not help to specify an attitude's *focus*.

1 Introduction

In his paper *Attitudes De Dicto and De Se*, David Lewis gives an account which claims that what an attitude is about can be specified uniformly in terms of properties. In this paper, I attempt to challenge Lewis' account.

We have good reasons to declare Lewis' success if his account establishes that properties should be treated as objects of attitudes. However, I will argue that his attempted establishment does not work. At the first stage of my challenge, I will examine Lewis' explicit claim that it is better to hold that objects of attitudes are properties than that they are propositions (Lewis, p.514). I will argue that Lewis' analysis does not exclude the possibility that objects of attitudes are something other than properties.

2 Lewis on why properties, not propositions, are the objects of attitudes

In the following discussion, I will adhere to Lewis' notion that a proposition can be identified with the set of all possible worlds where this proposition is true. For example, we can imagine possible worlds in which grass is red and possible worlds in which grass is green. The proposition 'grass is green' is therefore the set of all possible worlds in which grass is green.

It seems that objects of attitudes are not uniform. Take desire as the paradigm attitude. I want a Shiba Inu and a good grade for my mathematics class. It does not make sense to place a Shiba Inu and getting a decent grade into one single category. So, if objects of desires are uniform, then my object of desire had better not be a Shiba Inu or getting a decent grade. One group of popular candidates for objects of

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attitudes would be propositions. When I want a Shiba Inu, what I want is that 'I own a Shiba Inu' be true. When I want to get a decent grade, what I want is that 'I get a decent grade' be true. Apply the same line of paraphrasing *mutatis mutandis* to other attitudes like beliefs and knowledge, now it seems that my objects of desires are pretty much in order. Yet, despite the seeming versatility of propositions, Lewis claims that they do not capture all conceivable objects of desires and that properties are better candidates. Lewis takes two steps toward this claim. First, he argues that properties can account for at least as many cases of attitudes as propositions; and second, there are some cases that cannot be handled by propositions but can be handled by properties (Lewis, p.514).

Lewis observes that each proposition corresponds to a property of inhabiting a world which is a member of this proposition. Therefore, whenever we say one wants that P be true (where 'P' represents a proposition), it does as well to say that she wants to possess the property of inhabiting a world where P is true. Certainly, when I want that the earth be full of Shiba Inus, I want to inhabit a world in which the earth is full of Shiba Inus.

If objects of desires are propositions, then the more consistent propositions one includes in one's desires, the smaller the set of possible worlds satisfying one's desire is, until the conjunction of propositions desired determines a single world. At that time, there is nothing left to be desired. Further, there are no desires left to be satisfied once the character of the world is completely specified. Nevertheless, Lewis argues that there is something other than propositions that can be desired. Lewis asks us to imagine a world in which there are two Gods, one of which lives on the top of the highest mountain and the other which lives on the top of the coldest mountain, neither of which knows on which mountain they are situated. We assume that the desires of the two Gods specify the same class of worlds. However, even though this set includes the desires of the truth of 'such-and-such a God lives on the highest mountain' and 'such-and-such a God lives on the coldest mountain', it does not determine which God wants to live on which mountain. Suppose that one of them suddenly wants to live on the highest mountain, he would not contradict his previous desires, for he wants the same world still to be actual but only wants a specific location in the world. That is to say, this further desire cannot be accounted for by propositions which make the world distinct, but by the property of being located on the highest mountain which is within the world in question. (Lewis, p.529) Likewise, when I want to own a Shiba Inu, I do not merely want to inhabit a world in which someone satisfying the description of Shuguo Tang owns a Shiba Inu, but I also want that I am one of them. Hence, there are objects of desires beyond the scope of propositions.

In this section, I have presented Lewis' motivations for arguing that cases of desires can be specified in terms of properties uniformly. That is to say, a subject S desires X, if and only if the Lewisian formulation of the attitude 'S intends to be assigned such-and-such property Y' holds. For example, when I desire that a person called Shuguo Tang owns a Shiba Inu, I desire to be assigned the property of inhabiting a world in which Shuguo Tang owns a Shiba Inu. But when I desire that I myself own a Shiba Inu, I desire to be assigned the property of owning a Shiba Inu which distinguishes me as having this privilege. However, one might question whether properties as Lewis 'conceives them', suffice as objects of attitudes in the general case. In §3, I take up this objection and argue that Lewis' analysis does not exclude the possibility that objects of attitudes are something other than properties.

3 Can properties account for the focus of an attitude?

Consider this statement: a camera takes a photo A if and only if it catches such and such combination of light L. While it makes sense to say, appealing to the combination of light, that we have a uniform explanation of what goes on when a camera takes a photo, it does not follow that the objects of the photo are of one single kind. Instead, a photo contains the images of many different objects: a pig, a cat, a tower, the sky, the sun, etc. Similarly, the physical process of eating an apple can also be described fully in terms of how atoms of the apple interact with my mouth, but it is the apple that I am eating, not the atoms. In the same way, even though we fully and uniformly describe, as far as Lewis's conception of properties is concerned, what is going on when one is desiring (using a Lewisian formulation of the attitude), the objects of desires may still be abundant. Further, even if we allow that specifications of attitudinal objects supervene on Lewisian formulations of attitudes, we would still need to work out how the former corresponds to the latter².

Lewis' account could have been a theory attempting to specify what our attitudes are about without postulating properties as attitudinal objects. In the following, I will argue that, if Lewis insists that a property is the set of objects that instantiate it, such an attempt cannot succeed either (Lewis, p.515).

An attitude has a *focus*. What I call a *focus* is the feature of the attitudinal object on which my attention is directed. A successful theory of what attitudes are about should be able to specify the *focus* of an attitude. Given Lewis' notion of properties, if properties P and Q pick out the same particular object, then their Lewisian descriptions cannot be different, i.e. 'S intends to be assigned P' is the same as 'S intends to be assigned Q'. The problem for Lewis' account is that, in many cases, a pair of properties P and Q can specify the same object while the *focus* specified by the P-formulation is different from that specified by the Q-formulation.

A Lewisian formulation of an attitude, granted that it uniquely corresponds to the attitudinal object, does not necessarily tell you what the attitudinal *focus* is, just as a complete description of a photo (by specifying the relevant combination of light perhaps) cannot tell you the *focus* of creation and appreciation intended. For example, in the same work of photography, the shape of the Statue of Liberty could be the *focus* or the pose of the Statue of Liberty could be the *focus*. Importantly, a complete description of the physical image does not determine what the *focus* of the work is.

For a pair of properties that pick out the same object, I can think of three cases in which it seems that one specifies a different *focus* from that specified by the other. In the first case, one has an attitude towards inhabiting the world in which a necessary proposition is true. For example, John may desire to be assigned the property of living in a world in which $2+2=4$. Mary may desire to be assigned the property of living in a world in which $3+3=6$. In the second case, the instantiation of one of the properties necessitates instantiation of the other property. For instance, in a paradigmatic example of the second case, John wishes that the triangle in front of him is equilateral while Mary wishes that it is equiangular. Finally, in the third

² If A supervenes on B, then B determines A and not vice versa. For example, the room temperature supervenes on the complete status of air molecules in the room which includes each molecule's velocity: given the complete status of air molecules, we can calculate the average kinetic energy for this group of molecules which is equal to the room temperature; but given the room temperature, or the average kinetic energy, we still cannot know what is the complete status of air molecules in the room; e.g. to change the complete status but not the temperature, we can subtract 1J from a molecule's kinetic energy while add to another's kinetic energy 1J.

case, the same figure can be conceptualised as different artworks. For example, a photo of the Statue of Liberty can be appreciated as a good work for *The Shape of the Statue of Liberty*, or it can be highly regarded as *The Pose of the Statue of Liberty*. Under the former title, the *focus* of the audiences' appreciation is drawn to the geometrical patterns of the photo, while the second title guides the audiences to attend to an animate element of the Statue of Liberty. It could be the case that given the same pose, the photo shows the same shape and vice versa. Lewis himself realizes (and promptly dismisses) the problems in the first and the second cases (Lewis, p.515) but since dismissing these cases as marginal is not a satisfying approach, it is worth considering all three cases in more detail.

One might attempt to fix the difficulties in the first and the second cases by appealing to ignorance. In this line of argument, for the first case, if John were ignorant of the co-extensionality of the properties 'inhabiting the world in which $2+2=4$ ' and 'inhabiting the world in which $3+3=6$ ', then John would probably think that Mary and he desired to be located in different worlds; for the second case, again, suppose John and Mary were ignorant about the co-extensionality of the properties 'being an equilateral triangle' and 'being an equiangular triangle'. One could even imagine a quarrel between them on whether an equilateral triangle is better than an equiangular triangle. In other words, the *focus* of John's attitude can be the same as that of Mary's, even though they do not think so. The argument from ignorance not only owes us an explanation to why even a mathematician can have an impression of *focal* difference struck by the first and the second case, but also threatens to isolate knowledge as a special species of attitude. *But* for now, what is interesting about this line of argument, is that, whatever the verdict about the role of ignorance in certain cases, the third case introduced in the past paragraph avoids this concern altogether.

Suppose that John and Mary took a photo of the back of the Statue of Liberty. John and Mary dispute upon whether to name the photo *The Shape of the Statue of Liberty* or *The Pose of the Statue of Liberty*. John argues that looking at the back of the Statue of Liberty, the delicate corrugated shape of the robe stands out in contrast with the relatively plain pose shown, as from this angle we cannot even see her with a book at her left hand. Mary argues that the patterns of the back of the Statue of Liberty are much less abundant than that of the front and such a simple arrangement enables us to appreciate the power of the pose. So, we have the shape-formulation of John's attitude that John appreciates being assigned the property of entertaining the photo of the statue of liberty showing such-and-such shape and a similar pose-formulation of Mary's attitude.

Both shape- and pose-formulations seem to have a potential to specify a different *focus* from the other, but the focal difference cannot be explained by anyone's ignorance of the properties' co-extension. Both John and Mary know perfectly well that the shape-formulation and the pose-formulation necessitate each other. But when John and Mary are admiring the photo, given the arguments by them, we can see that the *focus* of John's attitude is different from that of Mary's.

Different *characterizations* of the Statue of Liberty triggered by 'shape' and 'pose' may help explain and justify why the former specifies a different *focus* from that specified by the latter in the third case. *Characterizations* are potentially very personalised frames in which we attend to objects. For a same piece of cloud resembling an animal, it can be the case that a person attends to it as if it is a horse while another person attends to it as if it is a mule. That is to say, the former person *characterises* the cloud as horse-like while the latter *characterises* it as mule-like. In the case of the photograph, 'Shape' normally helps to trigger a *characterization* of the Statue of

Liberty regarding its geometrical patterns that guides our attention to that geometrical feature that is the *focus* for John's attitude, while 'pose' triggers a *characterization* regarding that animate element that guides our attention to its anthropomorphic feature which is the *focus* for Mary's attitude.

There is no reason to think that different *characterizations* of an object cannot be triggered by other pairs of co-extensional properties. If so, then the *focal* difference in the first and the second case may also be explained and justified. For the first case, we can see the difference between necessary truths $2+2=4$ and $3+3=6$, since the calculation of the former requires four fingers and that of the latter requires two more. So, the *characterization* of a world triggered by the former fact can be different from that triggered by the latter. One might desire to inhabit a world in which $2+2=4$ while $3+3=5$ because this person does not want to calculate with more than one hand. However insane, this is a conceivable attitude.

In the second case, for the same triangle, since 'equally long' has a different meaning from 'equally acute', 'equilateral triangle' and 'equiangular triangle' can trigger different *characterizations*. Imagine that John and Mary have a very sharp triangle ABC designed to punch holes on a plain of wood. Here is how it works. The triangle shall be always perpendicular to the wooden plain. Starting with the *segment* AB on the wood, by evenly rotating it in order for AC to land on the plain, they punch a hole during the process with the *angle* BAC; then they turn AC evenly in order for BC to land on the plain and punch a hole during the process with the *angle* ACB, and so on... Now they have a series of holes on the wooden plain. Hoping that the distance between any two adjacent holes is equal, John expresses his wish for ABC to be an equilateral triangle. Hoping that each hole is equally deep, Mary express her wish for ABC to be an equiangular triangle. The *focus* of John's wishing is the situation among angles' acuteness in ABC, while the *focus* of Mary's wishing is the situation concerning the segments' lengths in ABC. However, such *focal* difference which can be triggered by *characterisations* of ABC as 'being equilateral triangle' and 'being equiangular triangle' cannot be captured by Lewis, since keeping the commitment that a property is defined by its extension, Lewis has to say that these two *characterisations* actually represent the same property.

Conclusion

To specify what an attitude is about, we need to know both the object of the attitude and the *focus* of the attitude. While Lewis' formulation of an attitude corresponds to the object, I have argued that it does not necessarily establish that properties should be treated as attitudinal objects. It may be the case that we can in principle pick out specifications of the attitudinal object from Lewisian formulations since the former supervenes on the latter, but it may be a challenge for Lewis to provide us with standardized procedures to do so. Furthermore, since Lewis' notion of property does not distinguish between a pair of co-extensional properties, his account is not sensitive to the *focal* difference between the properties. I conclude that Lewis' account of what attitudes are about is incomplete until it can specify the attitudinal *focus*.

Bibliography

Lewis, David. "Attitudes De Dicto and De Se." *The Philosophical Review* 88 (1979): 513-543.