Quine and Plantinga on De Re Necessity

Sagarka Datta[1*]

[1]Department of Philosophy, Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi, India; sagarika_phil@yahoo.com (S.D.).

Abstract. Aristotle introduced the modal notion of possibility and necessity. In Aristotle's language de dicto modality is that which involves the whole compound of subject and predicate. On the other hand, when a modal word qualifies only the predicate part of the statement, the modality is called de re. This paper examines Aristotle's modal notion in context of Quine and Plantinga. For Quine if something necessarily has a property relative to a certain specification, then it does not really have the property necessarily. It also highlights on Plantinga's revival of essence, for Plantinga, there is a necessity in contingency—an individual having a property in this world is necessarily determined by that world to have that property. This world-bound contingency becomes a necessary property which he will carry on from one world to another.

Keywords: Plantinga's concept of world bound property, Quine Referential opacity, Substitutivity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Customarily any property P when ascribed to the thing itself (say x) is said to be de re, while if it is ascribed to the proposition that x has P the property is said to be de dicto. Plantinga presents the Aristotelian account of the distinction between modality de re and de dicto given in Prior Analytics Aristotle constructs the following argument:
1. Every human being is necessarily rational
2. Every animal in this room is a human being
3. Therefore every animal in this room is necessarily rational.

Aristotle identifies the general type of this inference as where the conclusion is necessary only when exactly one of the premises, viz. the major premiss is necessary. And the noteworthy point is that (3) cannot be construed as: (3′) It is necessarily true that every animal in this room is rational. In modern terminology (3) should be construed as modality de re, that is every res of a certain kind has the property of being rational essentially or necessarily; (3′) on the contrary ascribes modality to the dictum or proposition that every animal in this room is rational.

Quine's criticism of essences is primarily based on his assertion that necessity is dependent on one's mode of conception. That which may be deemed necessary in one way of thinking can become contingent in another. Quine's manner of thought contrasts with the opposing perspective, which maintains that it is not feasible to employ different modes of thought to alter necessity into contingency or essences into accidents without resorting to the concept of essences once again.

1.1. Quine's Attack on De Dicto Modality

Quine in 'Three Grades of Modal Involvement' presented some arguments against de dicto modality Quine attacked the possibility of de dicto necessity as it violates the principle of extensionality. For Quine, being necessarily so-and-so and possibly so-and-so are not any characteristics of any object itself. It is not a necessary property of 9 itself that it is greater than 7 because if 'being greater than 7' were a necessary property of 9, it would have remained a necessary property throughout.43 But if we replace 9 with the number of planets we can no longer say that it is a necessary property of the number of planets to be greater than 7. 1. 'Nec 9 > 7' (henceforth 'necessity' will be abbreviated as 'nec') 2. 'The number of planets = 9' Therefore 'Nec. The number of planets > 7' The first two sentences are true while the conclusion is false because the number of planets could have been changed. Thus in the referentially opaque sentences (with 'Nec' operators) the principle of substitutivity does not hold good and it does not guarantee truth preservation. In this connection we may try to relate Quine's attack on de dicto modality (as sketched above) with his demolition of the empiricist notion of analyticity. To be more explicit, it is worthwhile to appreciate a connection between the above refutation of de dicto modality with his refutation of the empiricist programme of collapsing necessity with analyticity (i.e. collapsing real essences with verbal essences or synonymy). We can read the above argument as demonstrating that the so-called analyticity (or synonymy) is virtually based on a propositional attitude which in its turn is embedded in a specific conceptual scheme. Thus by refuting de dicto modality he also discards the possibility of rebuilding necessity in terms of analyticity

1.2. Quine's Attack on De Re Modality I.E. Essentialism

Quine has cast doubt on the notion of de re modality. According to Quine essentialism is the doctrine that some of the attributes of a thing may be essential to the thing and others accidental. Quine invites us to imagine a person who is both a mathematician and a cyclist. Quine has shown the contradiction in the following passage: 1. All mathematicians are necessarily rational but not necessarily two-legged. 2. All (well-formed) cyclists are necessarily two-legged but not necessarily rational. Now, if the person Paul is both a mathematician and a cyclist we may infer the following: 3. Paul is necessarily rational but not necessarily two-legged. 4. Paul is necessarily

* Correspondence: sagarika_phil@yahoo.com

two-legged but not necessarily rational. From 3 & 4 we get two contradictory statements: 5. Paul is necessarily rational & not necessarily rational 6. Paul is necessarily two-legged & not necessarily two-legged. Therefore, essentialism which leads to this type of contradiction is a philosophically unacceptable view. W.V.O.Quine argued against essences contending that what makes something necessary is not some feature of the object concerned but rather some feature of the way we describe the object. This is the essential point of Quine's semantic primacy of sentences as opposed to the semantic primacy of the modal operators contained in the sentences. In Aristotle's view we have seen there is a claim that the definition of human beings as rational animals gets at the essence of what it is to be human, while defining the species as featherless bipeds does not. But Quine holds that question about which traits are essential and which accidental are barely intelligible and wholly pointless. Quine's main argument against essentialism is 1. QML is committed to essentialism (Quine has abbreviated Quantified Modal Logic as QML) 2. QML is untenable and incoherent 3. Therefore, essentialism is untenable and incoherent

Quine rejects the idea of de re necessity, hence also the legitimacy of quantification into modal contexts, as QML requires. To repeat this point more strongly – he holds that question about which traits are essential and which accidental are barely intelligible. However, Quine's challenge was met in the fifties and early sixties by some modal logicians like Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam. They found fault with Quine and strongly asserted that science in fact used natural kind terms that have modal implications and that the methodology of science demonstrated natural kinds are having modal implications by demonstrating how particulars fall under modal terms. Further, Saul Kripke, Keith Donnellan, Hilary Putnam, Jacco Hintikka and Richard Montague accept the very Leibnitzian idea that if a proposition is necessarily true, it is true in all possible worlds and provides proofs of completeness for all non-equivalent modal logic. They strongly upheld the view that if necessity-and possibility-operators are applicable to propositions - which is another name for de dicto modality - then these operators are also applicable to quantification over possible worlds. That means if I say that a proposition P is necessary it simply means for every possible world W, P is true in W and to say that P is impossible simply means that P is false in all possible worlds. In case of de dicto modality realized or exemplified by the object.

So, whenever any substitution takes place in modal context the propositions should retain their truth value, proper name of the same thing is everywhere interchangeable. So co-referential names are substitutable in modal context, salvaveritate. There are many resemblances between the issue of modality and the issue of propositional attitude. Propositional attitude gives rise to non-extensional contexts; this in turn gives rise to syntactic problems. Some have claimed that ascriptions of propositional attitudes have not only a de dicto sense but also a de re sense. Quine has doubts about the interpretation of the terms which express propositional attitude, and had attacked both de dicto and de re sense. In the case of modality, Quine does not think that de dicto or de re has a place in regimented theory. For Quine, by allowing quantification into modal context we commit ourselves to de re modality, de re modal assertion is committed to Aristotelian essentialism in so far as such an assertion state that something is necessarily so-and-so irrespective of how it is specified. Quine rejects the possibility of quantified modal logic on the ground that the position occupied by the singular terms in a modal context is referentially opaque. For Quine, the cases in which modal operators occur under the scope of quantifiers are the concern of quantified modal logic (QML). To pin point the same, there are systems wherein a modal operator can occur under the scope of the quantifier which is thus unbound by the operator, or the modal operator may be bound by a quantifier which is thereby beyond the scope of the operator. The famous dictum of Quine is 'To be is to be the value of a variable'. Quine maintains that in a regimented theory there is no place for the ideas of necessity and possibility and hence de dicto and de re too cannot be accommodated here. The suggestion is that we are committed to asserting the existence of whatever we are committed to assigning as a value. In a quantified modal logic or predicate logic modal operators are within the scope of quantifiers. Now, according to Quine quantified modal logic is not intelligible as because it does not definitely indicate what the sentence is about— whether it is about quantification or about modality. After having applied a moderator and quantifier in a sentence if we use a singular term within the scope of modal operators' inconsistency is detected. So modal operators according to Quine are referentially opaque because if we substitute a co-referential singular name for the existing singular name, then the truth value of the new proposition may be different from the original one before substitution. So, the singular terms within the scope of modal operator are not purely referential—they do not refer to anything at all.

1.3. Plantinga Revived the Concept De Re

Plantinga commits himself to de re essences and he goes on to give an assessment of Quine's take on essentialism and its subsequent critique. He quotes Quine's definition of essentialism as a doctrine 'that some of the attributes of a thing (quite independently of the language in which the thing is referred to, if at all) may be essential to the thing and others accidental.' Plantinga reads Quine as stating that an essentialist does not only commit himself to x having essential properties but also to another property of having that property essentially and not non-essentially or relatively – i.e. not as contingent upon a particular mode of description. For every property P there is the property of having P essentially, and if x has P essentially then x has the property of having P essentially. Let us add that Quine's main theme of attack on necessity – whether that necessity is construed as analytic or synthetic – is that necessity is relative to a particular scheme of concepts or a web of beliefs. Now Plantinga argues that this thesis of essentialism as understood by Quine would have two implications: (A) If x has P essentially then x is subject to existential generalization i.e. to the statement that there exists at least one x such that x has P essentially. E.g. if the number 9 is essentially composite then the

above existential statement about 9 will also be true. (B) If x has P essentially then the same claim can be made of x irrespective of its various alternative descriptions. That is, if 9 is essentially composite then so is the number imagined by Paul at time t, so is the number of planets (if these descriptions do indeed apply to 9). It is clear that the essentialist postulate of (A) is meant to go beyond pure speculative or discursive necessity that is confined merely to definitions or system-building - bereft of any existential commitment. For Quine an essentialist does not merely say that if x exists then x has P essentially, but that P actually instantiates itself in x. By (B) the essentialist would ward off any relativistic force that would seek to reduce the phenomenon of x's having P to some relation involving x, P, and some description of x. In this anti-essentialist scheme of relativisation – '9' will be reduced to some description - say 'the number of planets' - and then the compositeness of 9 will be reduced to a relation between 9, compositeness and being the number of planets - in which case 9 will be alienated from its compositeness when the number of planets turn out to be greater or less than 9. To take some other examples in the same track – 2+2 will come to lack its essence of being 4 when one of its descriptions is falsified – i.e. when 2 and 2 drops of water refuse to be 4 drops – or when 2 and 2 apples spawn into a thousand apples due to some extra-ordinary circumstances. Water being H_2O will also be reduced to a contingent relation – i.e. water conceived under a particular description – say causing certain imageries under the microscope showing H_2O particles. In a different situation where such imageries turn out to be illusory due to technical follies of the microscope, water will have to abandon its purported essence of H_2O. Proposition (B) stated above is designed to ward off such relativistic moves - as pointed out by Quine. Plantinga also argues that the implication of (B) relies on Leibnitz's Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles. If two objects viz. number 9 and thenumber of planets is really identical then they will have the same properties – the property of compositeness that the former enjoys cannot be abandoned under a different description – for this discrepancy will only demonstrate the two numbers to be actually non-identical. If water and the liquid showing H_2O imageries under the microscope are really identical then if water really has the property of being H_2O in one situation it cannot possibly abandon that property in a different situation where its particular description – being represented as H_2O particles under microscope - is falsified. So the basic tenets of essentialism turn out to be: (A′)To say that an object has essences is to say that the object is really there possessing that property – having essences is not an abstract possibility.

1.4. Plantinga's view on Proper Name

For Plantinga, every object should have a property that it does not share with everyone, that property is uniquely possessed by the individual that has it. If Socrateity is an essence possessed by Socrates then in every possible world in which it is instantiated, it is instantiated by the individual Socrates and no other. There is no possible world in which something distinct from Socrates would have had Socrates identity. For him, an essence entails essential properties through definition. Socrates' world-indexed properties are essential to Socrates. So essence is that which the object x has not only in every possible world that he exists, but its essence also has to be instantiated in any given world by that particular object and by nothing else. For Plantinga proper names do not stand for bare particulars, they do indeed express properties. But one characteristic which Plantinga attributes to proper names is that they rigidly designate their referents. Though generally descriptions do not express essences, but some descriptions express essences. Also, for Plantinga, there is a necessity in contingency—an individual having a property in this world is necessarily determined by that world to have that property. This world-bound contingency becomes a necessary property which he will carry on from one world to another. So, though Kripke admitted transworld identity that is non-qualitative in nature, but Plantinga accepted the world-bound individuals.

2. CONCLUSION

However, Plantinga appreciates the main point of Quine's criticism as lying in a different insight, viz. that the celebrated distinction between essential and accidental attributes is at most a distinction between two kinds of traits – and the latter follow as analytically as the former from one or other mode of specifying the object. Snub-nosedness which is commonly accepted as a non-essential attribute of Socrates nevertheless does follow from the property of being the snub-nosed teacher of Plato. No trait can be elevated to a privileged position as revealing essences in a better way than any other trait. And if the distinction between essential and accidental attributes is watered down in this manner then the doctrine of essentialism cannot sustain itself.

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