

An Examination of Quine's Scepticism About De Re Necessity and his Distinction  
Between De Re Necessity and Belief

The concept of necessity is one that is used in daily language and thought, and it is a concept that we rarely reflect upon. When asked to give some examples of necessary things, people might be tempted to say some of the following.

- A) The sun will necessarily rise.
- B)  $1 + 1$  is necessarily true.
- C) All objects necessarily have a shape.

The philosophical problem of necessity arises when one tries to understand exactly what it is that 'necessity' is supposed to mean in these contexts. Is it supposed to be a comment on the way in which we use language? Is it supposed to mean how the universe must be? Or is it supposed to refer to certain logical properties and relationships that things possess and have with each other? 'de re' necessity is the idea that there are certain properties or relations that hold necessarily among the objects of our world. Quine is skeptical of this notion. He thinks that 'de re' necessity poses a number of logical problems. On the other hand, he thinks that 'de re' belief is a logically justified concept. This paper will describe Quine's position on these issues. It will argue that the notion of necessity, for Quine, is at best a semantic property of statements, and is not metaphysically extendable to objects.

Quine gives a number of examples of statements that are strictly necessary and/or possible. (Quine, 1961: 20) As examples of true statements, he gives: "9 is necessarily greater than 7" and "The number of planets is possibly less than 7." As examples of false statements, he gives: "The number of planets is necessarily greater than 7" and "9 is possibly less than 7." What Quine

wants to demonstrate with these examples is that necessity cannot be construed as a logical operator, because the substitution of one referent for another in each of the pairs of true and false sentences above changes their truth value. Even though there are nine planets, this 'de re' fact about the world cannot be used in claims of logical necessity with any consistency, i.e. while it might have been true (possible) that the number of planets was less than 7, it is definitely not true that 9 is, was, or ever could be less than 7. Quine calls contexts in which the reference is not unambiguously given 'referentially opaque.' Quine notes that there are many contexts where referential opacity can lead to some confusion, such as quotations and propositional attitudes like belief, doubt, etc. However, unlike other thinkers who treat the modal claims of necessity and possibility as being logical operators, Quine argues that these modal operators also give referentially opaque contexts to the statements that they are attached to. This is how he explains why the statements above give contradictory truth values on substitution with referentially equal expressions.

While one might agree with Quine's claim on this point, one could point out that other, similar cases of referential opacity are eliminated by the proper retranslation of the statement. Quine gives an example of this in the referentially opaque statement "Philip believes that Tegucigalpa is in Nicaragua" and eliminates the opacity by retranslating it as "Philip believes 'Tegucigalpa is in Nicaragua.'" (Quine, 1961: 20) However, he claims that such retranslations only apply to 'singular terms.' He writes:

The phenomenon of referential opacity has just now been explained by appeal to the behaviour of singular terms. But singular terms are eliminable, we know, by paraphrase. Ultimately the objects referred to in a theory are to be accounted not as the things named by the singular terms, but as the values of the variable of quantification. (Quine, 1961: 22) Quine then goes on to show that the problems of referential opacity in conjunction with modal operators such as necessity are merely compounded when quantified. Indeed, it is in the examples of quantification where the idea of necessity is shown to be most incoherent by Quine, as in “There exists an  $x$  such that  $x$  is necessarily greater than 7.” To highlight this incoherence, he gives the example where “in a game of a type admitting of no tie it is necessary that some one of the players will win, but there is no one player of whom it may be said to be necessary that he win.” (Quine, 1961: 25)

Unlike the concept of necessity, Quine argues that there is a logically coherent way of treating belief statements, despite the fact that superficially they are similar to necessity statements in that they are referentially opaque because they deal with intensions. He does this by distinguishing between two sorts of belief: notional and relational. Quine gives the following example to distinguish notional interpretations from relational ones. Consider the statement used by Quine to illustrate the difference (Quine, 1956: 102)

*Ralph believes that someone is a spy.*

Interpreted in a relational sense, the sentence would be transformed into something like 'Ralph knows x, and he believes that x is a spy.' In a notional sense, however, the sentence gets a different interpretation; namely; Ralph believes that some people in the world are spies. In order to make the idea less ambiguous, Quine suggests a reformulation of the sentences: "Instead of speaking of intensions we can speak of sentences, naming these by quotation. Instead of: 'w believes that...' we may say 'w believes-true '...'" Instead of: 'w believes y(...y...) of x' we may say: w believes '...y...' satisfied by x." (Quine, 1956: 109) The advantage of such a reformulation for Quine is that it changes a propositional intension into an expression, gaining logical clarity in the process.

Thus, Quine is skeptical about de re necessity because there is no way (that he can find) of disambiguating claims of necessity so as to remove their referential opacity. On the other hand, there does exist a way in which belief statements and other types of propositional attitudes can be so disambiguated. One key consequence of this view is that, whereas belief, desire, knowledge, and other propositional attitudes can have some meaning in their reference to the world, the idea of necessity can have at best only a semantic meaning that relates to the properties of specific statements as they occur in a language. However, because necessity cannot be given a thoroughly logical treatment, its use as a concept that says something non-trivial about objects and properties of objects is unfounded. Any claim of a statement's being 'necessarily true' for Quine immediately falls into difficulty because of the number of different formulations that it can be given. Ultimately, the fact that necessity cannot be

logically quantified into propositions means that the concept cannot be used to express anything other than analytically true propositions, which Quine takes a dim view of. Analytically true propositions are true by virtue of the meanings of their terms. The problem with necessity statements is that there are ambiguities in our references. If we all spoke an analytically pure language, then there would be no more ambiguity. But Quine poses the question: "...what objects would remain in a thus purified universe? An object  $x$  must, to survive, meet this condition: if  $S$  is a statement containing referential occurrence of a name of  $x$ , and  $S'$  is formed from  $S$  by substituting any different name of  $x$ , then  $S$  and  $S'$  not only must be alike in truth value as they stand, but must stay alike in truth value even when 'necessarily' or 'possibly' is prefixed." (Quine, 1961: p. 26-7) Quine shows, however, that this does not happen in basic examples of ordinary language.

## References

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