What George Could Not Have Been

ALVIN PLANTINGA
CALVIN COLLEGE

Joseph Camp points out, in his penetrating comments [1] that the strategy I adopted in *"De Re et De Dicto"* [2] depends upon the truth of

> (5) When and only when an individual x has a property P essentially, any proposition that predicates P of x^1 and is expressed by the result of replacing 'x' and 'P' in 'x lacks P' by a proper name of x and a canonical designation of P will be necessarily false.

He then presents what he takes to be a counter-example to this principle. This example runs essentially as follows. We hear Harry talking about some object; we ask him to tell us what he's talking about; he churlishly refuses, whereupon we decide to call this thing "George". Now consider the proposition expressed by

> (1) George lacks the property of being prime.

This proposition, says Camp, is not necessarily false, since it *could* be that George is a blackboard eraser—that is,

> (2) George is a blackboard eraser

is possibly true. But (2) entails (1), and hence by a familiar principle (1) is also possible. The fact is, however, that George is the number seven; George, therefore, is essentially prime. Accordingly, (5) is false.

What have I to say for myself? We should note first that our referring to the mysterious object as 'George' does not guarantee

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1 This clause is not present in Camp's version of (5) but is needed for the reasons cited in "De Re et De Dicto" p. 249.

that this name is functioning as a proper name in this context; per-
haps we should look upon it as an abbreviation for some such
definite description as 'the thing Harry was talking about'. This is
not to deny, of course, that 'George' is a proper name; proper
names do not always serve the function of proper naming. Some-
times, for example, they function as general terms (or fragments
thereof), as in "He's a veritable Daniel come to judgment". Indeed,
the same name can function both ways in the same sentence; no
doubt Daniel himself was a veritable Daniel come to judgment.
And perhaps in the situation Camp envisages, our referring to this
object as 'George' is no more than a tacit agreement to use that
name to abbreviate some such description as the one mentioned
above. If so, then of course we have no reason to think that (5) is
false.

     But why couldn't we use 'George' as a proper name of George
in these circumstances? No doubt we could; then, however, I should
think that the proposition expressed by (1) would indeed be nec-
essarily false. Of course we might say "Possibly George is a black-
board eraser," and if we did, we'd be right. Unfamiliar with the
ways of matrices, I might say, and say quite properly, "Possibly the

$$\text{determinant of the matrix } \begin{matrix} 2\,0\,1 \\ 1\,3\,2 \\ 1\,4\,3 \end{matrix} \text{ is greater than 3."}$$

But of course
what I say does not imply that the proposition

$$\text{the determinant of the matrix } \begin{matrix} 2\,0\,1 \\ 1\,3\,2 \\ 1\,4\,3 \end{matrix} \text{ is greater than 3}$$

is possibly true in the logical sense; I just mean that *for all I know*
it's true. Similarly, were we to say, in Camp's circumstances, "Pos-
sibly George is an eraser," we wouldn't mean (if we were careful)
to assert that the proposition expressed by (2) (taking 'George'
therein as a proper name of George) is not necessarily false; we'd
be saying only that for all we know it is true. We can see this more
clearly, perhaps, if we image Harry's joining our conversation. After
telling him that the subject of his earlier remarks has been named
'George' we ask him whether the proposition *George is a black-
board eraser* is logically possible. If he is willing to answer truth-
fully, he'll say no.

     But, says Camp,

the clincher is this: the proposition *George is a blackboard eraser* is a very simple proposition and it seems to me that the best available test for logical possibility in such a case is to try to conceive of a state of affairs or 'world' wherein the proposition would be true. And given the context in which we supposed ourselves to be using the name 'George' we could apply this test to the proposition expressed by 'George is a blackboard eraser' with no trouble at all. For instance we might imagine Harry suffering a change of heart and showing us a blackboard eraser, with the explanation that this is the thing he was talking about.

Crucial to this argument is the claim that the proposition expressed by (2) would be true in any world where Harry was talking about a blackboard eraser (and presumably false in any other). This confirms my suspicion that in Camp's view, (2) expresses the same proposition as 'The thing Harry was talking about is an eraser', so that 'George' is here serving as an abbreviation for a definite description. So taken, of course, we have no counter example to (5). But suppose on the other hand we think of 'George' in (2) as a proper name of George, i.e., the number 7. The possibility of a world in which Harry shows us a blackboard eraser has no tendency at all to show that the proposition expressed by (2) thus understood is possibly true; what it shows is only that Harry could have been thinking of something distinct from George and that (2) could have expressed a proposition distinct from the one it does express.

Consider an analogous case: Harry tells us that he's thinking of a number between 1 and 10; in fact he's thinking of 6. Now suppose we use 'Charley' to denote the number Harry's thinking of and ask whether the proposition expressed by

(6) Charley is prime

is possible. The answer will depend upon whether 'Charley' functions here as a proper name or as an abbreviation for some such definite description as 'the number Harry's thinking of.' If the latter, then the existence of worlds in which Harry is thinking of 7 rather than 6 shows the proposition (6) expresses to be contingent. If the former, however, then the existence of these worlds shows at best that (6) could have expressed a true proposition—i.e., that there are worlds in which it expresses a true proposition. There is nothing here to suggest that the proposition it *does* express could have been true. Harry knows that (6) expresses a necessarily false proposition. We don't; we know only that the proposition it ex-

presses is either necessarily true or necessarily false. That (6) is true, i.e., expresses a true proposition, is contingently false; this in no way compromises the fact that the proposition it expresses is necessarily false.

The resolution of Camp's objection, then, is to be seen in the fact that what is usually a proper name does not always function as one. If, for example, we decide for some reason to use 'Socrates' as short for 'the snubnosed teacher of Plato', then

(7) Socrates never taught Plato

will express a necessarily false proposition. But doesn't this show the definitions of "*De Re et de Dicto*" to be inadequate? For 'Socrates' is indeed a proper name of Socrates (even if it is not functioning as one in (7)); hence K(Socrates, snubnosedness) will be necessarily false; hence by D_4'' Socrates will be essentially snubnosed, which is absurd. Or more accurately, K(Socrates, snubnosedness) will not be well defined; there will be at least *two* propositions about Socrates expressed by the sentence to which it directs us. The trouble, of course, is that while 'Socrates' is indeed a proper name of Socrates, in (7) it isn't functioning as one. And the prudent course in giving the kernel function, would be to make explicit (what could without undue strain be left as tacitly assumed) that the proper name in question is, in the sentence in question, to function as a proper name of x.

But doesn't my employment of this distinction render the whole enterprise circular, in some subtle fashion? Perhaps any philosophically revealing and adequate account of proper names will involve essentialist notions; and perhaps I can explain what it is for a term to function as a proper name only by appealing to such notions. If so, he suggests, "one has the feeling that . . . the resulting analyses of *de re* sentences are somehow circular" (   ). He suggests further that even if I can defend my analyses against the charge of *abbreviative* circularity,

it does seem that they fail to satisfy a requirement on philosophical analyses that has considerable plausibility. That is the requirement that the analytic translation of a sentence contain no language the meaning of which has to be explained in terms of the concepts we are trying to analyze—what we might call a "no metalinguistic circularity" requirement. I should think that our purpose in showing how to translate *de re* modal sentences into sentences containing only *de dicto* modal locutions would be to demonstrate that we can say anything there is to be said about the necessity and possibility of

things without ever using anything but *de dicto* and nonmodal language. (   ).

But I didn't propose D₄″ and its confreres as an *analysis* schema for modality *de re*, and indeed am not really clear as to just what an analysis is. Nor do I propose these definitions as a means of enabling us to say whatever can be said about the possibility and necessity of things without using *de re* language. One thing to be said about the necessity of things is that for any object x and property P, x has P essentially if and only if $K(x,P)$ is necessarily false; and I have my doubts as to whether that's the same as saying that for any object x and property P, $K(x,P)$ is necessarily false if and only if $K(x,P)$ is necessarily false.

But if D₄″ and the others are not analysis schemata, what are they? What are they for? First of all, those of us who have the concept of *de re* modality and understand or think we understand *de re* locutions will find it interesting to note that every *de re* proposition is equivalent to some *de dicto* assertion. (The converse also holds: p is necessarily true if and only if p has the property of *being true* essentially.) This fact is interesting and worth knowing in its own right. It is further interesting to see that for any sentence containing *de re* locutions there is an equivalent sentence containing only *de dicto* and nonmodal locutions. And in this context it is hard to see how circularity, metalinguistic or otherwise, can so much as raise its ugly head; there is no attempt to 'reduce' one kind of language to another or to replace the less clear by the more clear, or to show how to say anything you'd like to say about the necessity of things without using *de re* language, or anything of the sort.

But secondly, there are those (Quine among them) who think to make tolerable sense of modality *de dicto* while finding modality *de re* utterly obscure. Such a person is perplexed by *de reist* talk of objects having properties essentially or necessarily; he feels he does not understand these alleged assertions and suspects a confusion somewhere. In *"De Dicto et de Re"* I tried to remove the grounds for suspecting confusion and to help the skeptic understand what the *de re* modalist is asserting by showing him how to find, for any sentence S containing *de re* expressions, an equivalent one—i.e., a sentence expressing a proposition equivalent to that expressed by S —containing locutions he does understand. This should at least reduce the obscurity he finds in *de re* discourse—reduce, not necessarily eliminate, since we have no reason to think that the proferred

de re substitute expresses the very same proposition as the *de dicto* original. (Nor, of course, have we any reason to think the reverse.) Here the possibility of circularity does indeed arise; presumably we won't have helped him much if the statement of the rule for finding the *de dicto* equivalent itself contains a *de re* expression or some other expression he does not understand. But the skeptic (or at any rate the skeptic I'm addressing) does have the idea of a proper name; the expression 'proper name' is one he understands and knows how to use. It is not necessary, for my purposes, that he and I agree upon some philosophically revealing explanation or account of the nature of proper names, or even that either of us have such an account. I'm inclined to think that any such account would indeed involve essentialist ideas; the skeptic may have his own theory about proper names, or may lack one altogether. What is required is only that he and I agree (at least for the most part) as to what assertions are expressed by the sentences resulting from the suggested substitutions of proper names and canonical designations into '*x* lacks *P*'.

References

[1] Camp, Joseph. "Plantinga on *De Dicto* and *De Re*," *Noûs*, V, 2.
[2] Plantinga, Alvin. "*De Re et De Dicto*," *Noûs*, III, 3 (1969): 235–258.