



MARIA EBNER

UNIwersytet Warszawski

ORCID: : 0000-0002-8142-2402

THE PROGRESS OF CIVILIZATION AND THE *DE DICTO/DE RE* DISTINCTION

1. Introduction. The purpose and structure of the paper.

In this paper I would like to present my own argument supporting the thesis that *de dicto* beliefs are, in a certain sense, more fundamental, *viz.* they are indispensable for the progress of civilization, than *de re* beliefs, which contravenes Tyler Burge's claim about the priority of *de re* beliefs. In his insightful paper *Belief de re* Burge argues that having *de re* attitudes is a necessary condition for using and understanding language, and, indeed, for having any propositional attitudes at all. Even if *de re* beliefs are fundamental in this sense, we can still search for different senses which enable us to classify *de dicto* beliefs as more fundamental. The paper consists of three main parts (preceded by the brief explanation of the crucial distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* beliefs). The first part places Burge's argument in a broader context of philosophical discussion which sheds light on Burge's line of reasoning and the assumptions

standing behind it. The second part is devoted to the reconstruction and analysis of Burge's argument. In the third part, I give an outline of my own argument which leads to the contrary conclusion

2. Explanation of basic notions: distinction *de dicto/de re*.

The concept of *de re* belief is understood in many different senses: (a) syntactical, (b) as object dependent thought and (3) epistemic. I shall constrain myself to a brief description of these senses:

(a) syntactical

Belief sentence *S* will be said to express a modality *de re* if there is a scope of some belief operator in it which contains some free occurrence of an individual-variable; otherwise *S* will be said to express a modality *de dicto*.

The above definition is an application of Max Cresswell and George Hughes's definition (Cresswell, Hughes, 1968, p.184) to belief sentences.

The sentence "Catullus knows that Cesar is black" may be, for example, interpreted either *de dicto* or *de re*:

Catullus knows that $\exists x (x = \text{Cesar and } x \text{ is black})$. (*de dicto* interpretation)

$\exists x x = \text{Cesar and } (\text{Catullus knows that } x \text{ is black})$. (*de re* interpretation)

Only in the second case substitution of the word "Cesar" with the expression "Octavian Augustus's predecessor" preserves the truth value of the initial sentence in all contexts.

(b) as object dependent thought

If a belief is of that sort that it would not exist if the particular object (or set of objects) external to the believer did not exist then this belief is *de re*; otherwise the belief is *de dicto*.

(c) epistemic

:(...) *de re* belief is a kind of belief whose possession requires having one or another epistemically interesting rapport with the object or objects the belief is about”.

(Richard 1997, p. 215)

The most important aspect of the *de dicto/de re* distinction for our purposes in this paper derives, however, from the basic meanings of the Latin phrases “*de dicto*” and “*de re*”. “*Dictum*” is to be understood as “a proposition” and “*res*” as “an object”, so that we can say – simplifying somewhat - that *de dicto* belief sentences express relations between a subject and a proposition, while *de re* belief sentences express relations between a subject, an object and a property.¹

3. Transcendental arguments.

Transcendental arguments play a significant role in the context of our discussion, as one of the major arguments for the priority of *de re* beliefs, *viz.* Burge’s argument from language understanding may be classified as having such a structure. For that reason we shall examine a few issues,

¹ Cf. the specified sense of the distinction *de dicto/de re* in Quine 1956.

which will give us the opportunity to understand more thoroughly Burge's way of reasoning making apparent some assumptions standing behind it. These issues include the following ones: role of transcendental arguments in philosophical tradition, description of the basic structure of such arguments and enumeration of qualities responsible for their division into two different categories.

Let us begin with the historical role of transcendental arguments, the matter which has a close connection with Burge's case for the priority of *de re* beliefs.² One of the reasons, why transcendental arguments have become the subject of attention of contemporary philosophers is their use by Kant as a strategy of defence against sceptical challenge. However, transcendental arguments were not only used by their most prominent proponent, but are applied as a powerful weapon against the Sceptic by subsequent philosophers. We can even name such kinds of arguments lightsabers of the knights of realism against the dark empire of scepticism. Powerful as they may be, are they actually effective against the enemy at which they are aimed? Or has the Sceptic a shield which protects him from the attacks of the Realist and is in the long run invincible? To answer these questions let us take a closer look at the structure of transcendental arguments.

Transcendental arguments have a structure based on *modus ponens* rule of inference. We begin with sentences which cannot reasonably be challenged and then show that they entail sentences which are much more questionable. This reasoning leads to the conclusion that these sentences derived through *modus ponens* are also true and should be accepted despite initial uncertainty. Once we get the Sceptic

² There is no strict definition of transcendental arguments to be found in the literature. Some philosophers try rather to formulate characteristic features of this kind of arguments, yet without a claim to the completeness or indispensability of all mentioned qualities. One such attempt is undertaken by Stern 2011.

to acknowledge certain sentences, and he admits that they entail sentences which he regards as dubious, we have our fish on the hook.

There are different versions of transcendental arguments and they are usually divided into different categories (*cf.* Vahid 2011, p. 397). Arguments belonging to the first category are called “objective transcendental arguments” (or “first-order transcendental arguments”). Our indubitable sentences concern having certain thoughts, experiences or beliefs and it is argued that they entail sentences which say something about the world (so that they have first-order content). It is shown that certain states of affairs are necessary conditions of those states of the subject which seem perfectly trustworthy. Could we be deceived in the matter of our own experiences? When we see, for example, a red apple, we are sure of what we experience, even if there is, in fact, nothing but a white cloth on the table before us, and the apple is, in fact, the product of a deluded mind. Similarly, if we are mentally well, and all other conditions are conducive, we are certain that we experience certain things and this belief seems well-justified indeed. When our experiences would be impossible without specific conditions obtaining, we have a good argument that sentences stating that these conditions obtain are true. This kind of transcendental argument is, however, susceptible to the Sceptic’s complaint that there is no bridge linking the area of private experiences and external reality. How can we know that the conclusions of transcendental arguments derived through *modus ponens* are true? They talk about an external reality to which we have no direct access. It seems impossible to cross the gap between the domain of experiences of the subject, which are certain appearances of objects, and the objects themselves. Kant was well-aware of this – at first sight – insurmountable obstacle and presents his own response. He decides to abolish the distinct border which separates the domain of a subject’s experiences

and external objects, and his new approach is called “transcendental idealism”. The role of the subject in the process of cognition is not only a passive, but also an active one. Objects are partly constructed by the subject as she processes data delivered by her senses using concepts to put the data in order. Even the process of sense experience is not wholly receptive as *a priori* forms of sensibility – space and time – are involved. The problem with Kant’s response is that most philosophers are not inclined to assume transcendental idealism, even if its acceptance can silence the Sceptic’s voice of opposition. The question is, is there any other possible way of using transcendental arguments without raising the objection just mentioned? It seems, there is. Let us take a closer look at this line of argumentation.

The second category of transcendental arguments avoids the Sceptic’s objection presented above, though its conclusions are not so far-reaching, and may therefore not seem satisfactory. These arguments are called “subjective transcendental arguments” (or “second-order transcendental arguments”). Sometimes they are also called “modest”, as they are not conclusive when we should decide the truth value of chosen sentences reporting states of affairs in the world. These arguments show that having experiences, thoughts or beliefs of certain types is conditioned by specific beliefs of the subject. Belief sentences which are conclusions of subjective transcendental arguments have second-order content, as they express the belief relation between a subject and a proposition which is the content of the subject’s belief. After application of *modus ponens* rule we get sentences which say something about the subject’s beliefs, not about objective, subject-independent facts. Modest versions of transcendental arguments show that our thoughts are mutually-dependent and create a complex network

with some elements which are interconnected, so that when certain elements are removed, others which are supported by them collapse. Which category of arguments is more willingly applied in support of defended theses? Contrary to first expectations, objective transcendental arguments are not always replaced by their more modest counterparts. For example, Ted Warfield developed the outline of the antiseptical argument from semantic externalism presented by Hilary Putnam, supplementing it by the additional assumption of privileged self-knowledge concerning the subject's own mental states (Warfield 1999). This argument is supposed to debunk scepticism about the external world (or at least one sceptical hypothesis, namely the disembodied brains in a vat hypothesis). Thence, the contemporary resurrection of transcendental arguments may be observed when we browse literature devoted to the subject of scepticism. One such argument will receive a detailed examination in this paper. It is an argument devised by Tyler Burge and it is a transcendental argument of the subjective kind.

4. Burge's transcendental argument for priority of *de re* beliefs.

Burge's argument grows from the tradition of transcendental arguments probably initiated by Kant. What I mean here is standing in direct relation to the problem of scepticism, even if it was for Burge a secondary matter (or maybe even an unintended one). We shall now take a closer look at Burge's reasoning, to move on later to its further, more detailed discussion (most notably certain striking similarities with John Searl's Chinese Room thought experiment).

The argument proceeds in the following way:

1. If a subject *S* understands expression *e*, then *S* has the ability to recognize objects which are correlated with expression *e*.
2. If *S* has the ability to recognize objects which are correlated with expression *e*, then *S* has at least one *de re* belief.
3. *S* understands expression *e*.

Hence,

S has at least one *de re* belief. [1, 2, 3, *modus ponens*]

(Burge 1977, p. 347-348)

We have previously said that Burge's argument is of a modest kind. But be careful! It looks like a modest transcendental argument, but together with our understanding of the phrase "belief *de re*" it is really an objective transcendental argument in disguise. After all, belief *de re* requires the existence of the object of belief – otherwise it would be a *de dicto* belief. We should immediately notice that it makes Burge's argument, similarly to other objective transcendental arguments, prone to the objection that its correctness depends on the assumption that idealism is to be excluded from the range of acceptable metaphysical possibilities.

We shall now take a closer look at additional considerations backing Burge's argument, especially the part which argues for similar results to those achieved by John Searle's famous Chinese Room thought experiment presented to the public a few years later. The intuitions which this experiment evokes speak against ascribing understanding to a computer which can carry out manipulation of symbols at a syntactical level without capacity to attribute semantic reference to those symbols. This point is made by describing an imaginary situation in which a person is locked in a room and the only possible way to communicate with the world outside the room is by means of putting notes on sheets

of paper. As it turns out, the messages which the inhabitant of the room receives are imparted exclusively in Chinese, so he does not have a clue what they mean. However, luckily for the person locked in, a book of instructions is available in the room providing him with the necessary resources to answer Chinese messages (but the instructions include only steps which are to be taken to successfully operate with the symbols, without giving the smallest inkling of their meaning). As a result, a sender of messages who is not aware that the answers to them are written by following the instructions collected in the book may be inclined to regard the inhabitant of the room as familiar with Chinese, or even more, as a fluent user of Chinese, who understands this language very well; while we, being in possession of all the facts (including the existence of the book of instructions), are not make this mistake. Most unprejudiced readers will exclude the possibility that in the presented situation the person locked in the room does understand Chinese, which leads to the most striking conclusion concerning the assessment of the seemingly far-reaching analogy between a computer and a human mind. The analogy inevitably breaks down because we are quite certain that we understand the languages which we use, but we refuse to ascribe such understanding to computers. The reinforcement of this conclusion relies on the observation that the language competence of computers resembles in every respect the competence of a person locked in a Chinese room, who, contrary to deceptive appearances, does not understand the Chinese language. (Searle 1980, p. 417-418)

The claim defended by Burge bears the significant similarity to that in support of which the Chinese room experiment was devised, namely that “current machines that are programmed with indexical-free (mathematical) language do not autonomously use or understand language” (Burge 1977, p. 347). Understanding language is conditioned

by mastering skills which extend beyond the scope of performance of purely syntactical operations on symbols, such as recognition and initiation of correlations between symbols and their extralinguistic reference. These additional skills encompass either verbal reactions to one's perceptions or some sorts of nonverbal practical activities, *e. g.* a certain course of action in response to someone's request. The same considerations validate, in Burge's opinion, the even bolder and more controversial thesis that a necessary condition of having any propositional attitudes at all by a given subject is an appropriateness of attribution of at least some *de re* attitudes to that subject. When a thought of a subject concerns a certain object it requires from the subject the ability to correlate such a thought with that object, which means that changes in the object are reflected in the variation of the content of the thought. The second, extended version of the claim about the crucial role of *de re* beliefs which turn out to be indispensable to ascribing any propositional attitudes (not only to credit a subject with understanding of sentences, as a more modest version of the claim states), assumes a close connection between thoughts and language. Assumption of such a connection is left without justification, which burdens the reader with the task of either finding some reasonable argument backing the assumption, or counterevidence allowing that illicit premise to be debunked.

I shall not myself take on this challenging philosophical undertaking here, constraining my comments on the subject of the debate to a few brief remarks. First, we should take into account relations of the subject to propositions which formulate some grammar rules, such as the rule that we do not use future tenses in a subordinate clause which begins with the word "when". The most straightforward response to the presented example is an indication that the object of that

proposition is the word “when” so a subject who has a belief with this content has to be able to identify the word “when” to apply the previously mentioned rule correctly. In fact, correct application of the rule gives us ground to suppose that a subject understands that rule. The question is, is a person with an impaired capacity of reasoning able to hold a belief that the use of a future tense is forbidden after “when” even if, let’s say, she cannot apply this rule to particular instances because of some reasons? Problems of this kind are met on a daily basis by learners of foreign languages and are not necessarily to be counted as the outcomes of a mental illness. Such objects as words are a very special sort of objects as they cannot be identified with definite tokens, but what we have in mind is of a more abstract nature; but even when we put these difficulties aside, a new query appears when we think of mathematical propositions. Do they treat of abstract objects and if so, how is the correlation of propositional attitudes with these objects to be understood? All these observations seem to pose difficulties for Burge’s claim about the priority of *de re* beliefs, but they do not stand in direct contradiction with the thesis that having at least one *de re* attitude is a necessary condition of having any propositional attitudes or understanding any language.

5. Argument from the progress of civilization for priority of *de dicto* beliefs.

Our previous investigations into the matter of distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* beliefs seem to lead to the conclusion (although not an imminent one) that *de re* beliefs characterize certain sort of fundamentality, which cannot be ascribed *de dicto* beliefs. Admitting primacy of *de re* beliefs is, however, in no way an ultimate outcome of this paper. On the contrary, I believe that there is at least one argument (putting aside doubts concerning Burge’s metaphysical assumptions),

which allows us to defend the claim about priority of *de dicto* beliefs. True, it is a specific sort of priority, but, nevertheless, not one which should be neglected. The sort of priority I have in mind is *de dicto* beliefs' indispensability for the progress of civilization.

In this part of the paper I will present my own argument from the progress of civilization using as an example the process of inventing a boat. The argument may be criticized in various ways. I try to predict and address some of them. These investigations will be accompanied by additional reflections concerning metaphysics of change.

The promised argument starts with the basic, although not too often posed question, about the kind of beliefs making possible the new invention. Which thoughts cause inventors to act in a definite way, are a decisive motivating factor? Let us examine more closely the case of the invention of a boat. For this purpose I shall for a moment take upon myself the role of a story-teller.

The lonely inventor stands at the riverside contemplating the overwhelming power of nature and the futility of all human efforts to overcome it. But in a certain moment a glimmer of hope wakes in the inventor's mind "What if I took a piece of wood and used it to build a boat?" Of course, the expression "a boat" is absent in the inventor's language, as she has never in her life encountered a boat or heard about such thing; but the exact choice of words is of no importance in this case. The most important matter is that our inventor is struck by the idea of creating a new object. She thinks: "This new object, let's call it a boat, will enable me to cross the river. Oh, I see a trunk of a fallen tree - it seems perfectly suited to my purposes". The point which I would like to make is that the inventor's thought about as yet the non-existent object is exactly this thought which is the reason for her subsequent action. A thought about a non-existent object is unarguably a thought classified

as *de dicto*. So it seems *prima facie* that *de dicto* thoughts are indispensable if the progress of civilization is to take place. I would like to claim that such a conclusion – surprising as it may seem to many – is a sound one also after less hasty examination.

One objection that may presumably be raised by the declared defendant of the priority of *de re* beliefs over *de dicto* beliefs challenges the alleged inventor's thought that a boat is a means of transport which makes crossing the river possible. It is much more natural – continues my opponent – that the inventor is actually thinking about the chosen trunk – the thought which gives her a decisive spur to action concerns the already existing object – namely the piece of wood. This objection is in no way a knock out. What's more, it is utterly unconvincing when we try to apply it to other – more sophisticated – inventions. When we take such complicated machines as computing machines, it seems absurd that the inventor's thought should be fixed on some metal or plastic elements which she considers as the source of computations taking place. Rather, she has a certain idea of a new object in her mind and the resources which would be appropriate to make these plans something more than the bold vision of an absent-minded scientist are a secondary matter. After all, building a complicated machine requires the use of many different elements, none of which is sufficient on its own, and none of which is distinguished as being irreplaceable. The imminent corollary of our answer is the appreciation of the key role of *de dicto* beliefs in the thought processes leading to a new invention.

Such a topic as new inventions, is of course, entangled in basic ontological questions concerning the existence of various objects and the changes by which these objects are affected. It is not always such an easy task to define the line demarcating the border between one object and another which it becomes as a result of an ongoing transformation. How

can we say when one object becomes another one? What is the *differentia specifica* of such objects as violin and viola, or bicycle and motorbike? Is a viola just a larger violin? Perhaps these issues are not so hard to decide, but when we are in the shoes of an inventor, they turn out to be much more complicated. Let's assume for the sake of argument that the violin was invented first. Does a person who wishes to invent the viola think about a larger violin or is it a thought about a non-existent instrument? As you see, the matters are not so easy to settle as it may seem at first sight.

It sometimes happens that a natural object plays the role of the inspiration for a new invention. One famous example is the construction of an aeroplane which was the result of people's observation of birds floating in the air. In this case, it seems very natural to think of the idea of the invention of an aeroplane as involving a *de dicto* belief about a non-existent object, for which the most illustrious model can be found in the natural world. So the inventor's thought concerns rather certain representatives of the animal kingdom than some extraordinarily light artificial resources. This is the case of taking as a model one object in order to create another one.

There is a general question to be raised of when we may speak of a transition of one object into another one. Although giving an even partly satisfying answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, I shall give expression to a few observations having bearing on this topic. The first observation indicates that transformation into a different object is often due to a change of the function of the object. Think about such examples as a stick and a toothpick or – taking a more fanciful example – a stick and a wand. The shape of the material given at the outset is not transformed – the only (or main) change is the purpose for which the given piece of wood is used. Another possibility of the coming into

existence of a new object is the change of quantity which certain sets of objects undergo. So the fact that we may call a certain object a meadow, or a piece of music, is thoroughly dependent on the number of stalks of grass or notes. As we see, the multiplication of objects of a certain type may result in the creation of a completely different object. Is this not what composers do after all? The third possibility (as was the second one) is a certain sub-kind of the first possibility, which was the change of the function of the object. This change may be invoked by the change of place of the object, which happens, for example, when a commonly used everyday object is placed in a museum. Such a change of location influences the perspective of the viewer who gets the opportunity to see the object from a different angle.

I do not claim that the list of possibilities given above is an exhaustive one or that it has been sufficiently discussed; my aim was rather to point out the area of further investigation which is most helpful when it comes to assessment of the argument from the progress of civilization presented in this paper. One more disturbing objection may lurk on the horizon. It may be advocated that the progress of civilization is, to a great extent, a matter of accident rather than conscious planning. This objection may sound quite persuasive when we think about prehistoric or very early inventions, but it turns out to be utterly unconvincing when it comes to modern, very complex inventions. It is worth explicitly stressing that the view of the progress of which stands behind this paper is Kantian in spirit. The role of the agent is to ask questions, the role of the universe is to deliver answers, not the other way round. It is not so that ready answers for questions disconcerting the inventor's mind are waiting to be discovered, it is rather the role of an inventor to investigate the fascinating riddles of the surrounding world.

6. Conclusion.

The point of this paper was to present the Reader with an argument which seems to show that there is at least one sense in which we may claim that *de dicto* beliefs are more basic than *de re* beliefs different from that specified by Burge. Even when we accept that *de re* beliefs are indispensable for understanding language, it may well be so, as I argue, that the creative power of the human mind, which makes the progress of civilization possible, requires possession of some *de dicto* beliefs.

References:

- Burge T. (1977). Belief de re. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (6), 338-362
- Cresswell M. J., Hughes E. (1968). *An Introduction to Modal Logic*. London: Methuen and Co
- Kaplan D. (1968). Quantifying in. *Synthese* 19, 178-214
- Putnam H. (1999). Brains in a Vat. In: K. DeRose, T. A. Warfield (eds.), *Skepticism. A Contemporary Reader* (27-42). New-York Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Quine W. V. (1956). Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes. *Journal of Philosophy*, 53, 177-187
- Richard M. (1997). Propositional Attitudes. In: B. Hale, C. Wright (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (197-226). Blackwell Publishers
- Searle J. R. (1980). Minds, brains and programs. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3 (3), 417-457
- Stern R. (2008). Kant's Response to Skepticism. In: J. Greco (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism* (265-279). Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press

- Stern R. (2011). Transcendental Arguments. In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/transcendental-arguments/>
- Strawson P. (1966). Objectivity and Unity. In: *The Bounds of Sense* (72-117). London: Methuen & Co Ltd
- Strawson P. (1985). *Scepticism and Naturalism: some Varieties*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Vahid H. (2011), Skepticism and Varieties of Transcendental Arguments. *Logos & Episteme*, 2 (3), 395-411
- Warfield T. A. (1999). A Priori Knowledge of the World: Knowing the World by Knowing Our Minds. In: K. DeRose, T. A. Warfield (eds.), *Skepticism. A Contemporary Reader* (76-90). Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press

The progress of civilization and the *de dicto/de re* distinction

Abstract:

In this paper I present my own argument in support of the thesis that *de dicto* beliefs are, in at least one sense, more basic than *de re* beliefs. This argument rests on the fact of the progress of civilization, which appears, as I try to demonstrate, not to be possible without *de dicto* beliefs constituting a key part of the mental processes of the inventor. My argument is to counterweigh the force of Tyler Burge's argument for the fundamentality of *de re* beliefs, leading to the conclusion that beliefs *de re* are a necessary condition of language understanding and having propositional attitudes at all (Burge 1977, p. 347-348). The first part of the paper is devoted to the examination of the structure of different versions of transcendental arguments – objective and subjective,

the second part focuses on an analysis of Burge's argument from language understanding, while the aim of the third part is to present the Reader with the argument from the progress of civilization. The exposition of the argument is followed by a discussion of certain possible objections which the argument may face.

key words: *de dicto* belief, *de re* belief, transcendental arguments, argument from understanding language, argument from progress of civilization