

PHIL 4603: Metaphysics  
Prof. Funkhouser  
Plantinga, “Modalities: Basic Concepts and Distinctions”

1.

• Q: What is the difference between a necessary truth and a contingent truth?

◦ Some clarifications: Not all necessary truths are truths of logic. *Necessity* is intended in a sense stronger than mere causal or natural necessity. Nor is necessity equivalent to unrevisability. Finally, necessity should be distinguished from the epistemic notions of the self-evident and *a priori*.

• Distinguish:

*de dicto* necessity: the necessary truth of a proposition

*de re* necessity: an object’s necessary possession of a property

◦ An application:

Instead, (9) must be construed (if Aristotle is correct) as the claim that each animal in this room has a certain property — the property of being rational — *necessarily* or *essentially*. That is to say, (9) must be taken as an expression of modality *de re* rather than modality *de dicto*. And what this means is that (9) is not the assertion that a certain *dictum* or proposition — *every animal in this room is rational* — is necessarily true, but is instead the assertion that each *res* of a certain kind has a certain property essentially or necessarily — or, what comes to the same, the assertion that each such thing has the modal property of being essentially rational. (139)

◦ Plantinga defines an *essential property* of an object as a property that that object could not conceivably lack. And to allow for essential properties is to tolerate *de re* modality.

2.

- An example of a *de re* necessity: 9 is essentially composite.

*essentialism*: “The claim that objects have some of their properties essentially or necessarily is part of what we may call *essentialism*.” (141) (Plus, some objects have some of their properties only accidentally, and some essential properties are not had by all objects.)

- For every property  $P$ , there is the property of having  $P$  essentially.

- Quine and Kneale, opponents of essentialism, hold that objects do not themselves have essential properties. According to them, it only makes sense to speak of objects having properties essentially *under certain descriptions*. The slogan is: Necessity lies in language, not in the world.

Fundamentally, therefore, Kneale holds that there is no such thing, for a property  $P$ , as the property of having  $P$  essentially; these are only three-termed relations involving  $P$ , an object  $x$ , and the various ways of selecting  $x$  for attention. (143)

- See the “Number of Apostles” argument against essentialism, (8) - (12), p. 143.

- Plantinga objects to premise (11), and charges Kneale with failing to appreciate the *de re/de dicto* distinction. The essentialist *accepts* that the number of apostles (that number being 12) is essentially composite. The essentialist *rejects*, however, that the proposition ‘the number of apostles is composite’ is necessarily true.

- Quine offers an argument against essentialism that is similar to Kneale’s: the mathematical cyclist. Plantinga raises the same objection — there is a failure to appreciate the *de re/de dicto* distinction. (See p. 146.)

- Plantinga acknowledges that:

... so it will indeed be true, as Quine suggests, that ways of uniquely specifying an object are not all on the same footing. Those from which each of its essential properties follows must be awarded the accolade as best revealing the essence of the object. (146)