



Values, motivation and biodiversity

One of the central objectives of the BIOMOT project is to reach a better understanding of the motivations that lead individuals to act positively or negatively towards nature and specifically biodiversity. Despite the importance of decisions and actions with implications for biodiversity – be they the collective decisions made by individuals, or the policy decisions of corporations, charities and governments – the motivations that lead to these decisions and actions are little understood.

At the University of Manchester the philosophy department is contributing to the BIOMOT research by employing conceptual tools from analytical philosophy to analyse interviews. An important example of this employment is the distinction between *de re/de dicto* attitudes that we may have to value biodiversity

The distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* attitudes can be traced back at least as far as Aristotle. An *attitude* is here any mental state, such as a belief, evaluation, emotion, intention, doubt, and so on.

De re attitudes are about particular things; in contrast, de dicto attitudes are about concepts or descriptions. For example, if you value a specific park, for instance the New Forest National Park in the UK, then your attitude is de re: you are valuing a particular thing. In contrast, if you think that all national parks are valuable, then your judgment is probably de dicto: your attitude isn't about a specific national park but rather about the idea of national parks.

It is sometimes difficult to know whether someone is expressing a de re or de dicto attitude. Consider the following claim: "John believes that the chief executive of News Corporation is rich".

This could express *either* a de re or a de dicto attitude. On a de re reading, John believes of a particular person (Rupert Murdoch) that he is rich. On a de dicto reading, what he believes is that whoever is the chief executive of News Corp is rich. These beliefs are quite different.

The de re/de dicto distinction is also illustrated in this imaginary interview with Zsa Zsa Gabor:

- **Zsa Zsa:** "Ah! People misunderstand me! They think that I am just a creature of leisure, that I do nothing useful, but they are wrong. I am constantly finding new ways to do good for people."
- **Interviewer:** "Like what?"
- **Zsa Zsa:** "I have found a way of keeping my husband young and healthy, almost forever."
- **Interviewer:** "Eternal youth... that is quite a discovery! How do you do it?"

- **Zsa Zsa:** “I get a new one every five years!”

(Cyril Hare ‘Voices From Another World’ *Ethics* 117, no. 3, 2007)

We *expect* that Zsa Zsa Gabor would have a *de re* attitude towards her husband, that is, that she cares about a particular person. But, in this imaginary interview, her expressed concern for her husband is *de dicto*: none of her actual past or present husbands stay forever young and healthy, rather, the person that satisfies the description ‘Zsa Zsa’s husband’ is always someone young and healthy.

As in these examples, our judgements about biodiversity can also be *de re* or *de dicto*. Here is an example: “Ralph values a site of high biodiversity”.

Does Ralph *de re* value a particular site (ones, perhaps, that he is personally acquainted with), or does he *de dicto* value just a site that happens to satisfy the description ‘high biodiversity’ (rather than any particular ones)? The verbal report as such doesn’t provide enough information to determine whether the *de re* or *de dicto* reading is appropriate.

Determining whether a person’s attitudes towards biodiversity are *de re* or *de dicto* is, in effect, to determine whether that person is motivated by things with which they are either directly or indirectly acquainted – the places in which they grew up, forests they have walked in, rich and varied features of nature that they have experience, places that they have read about, etc. – or whether their concerns are more general and unspecific. However, as the examples above indicate, it can be difficult to determine from just one sentence whether a person’s attitude is *de re* or *de dicto*. To establish this, we need more detailed interviews to find whether their concerns are directed more to things or to theories. To this end, the life story interviews that form part of the BIOMOT research are therefore particularly useful.



Snaeffellsnes National Park, Iceland

Preliminary findings

The initial findings from the interviews are that *de re* concerns about nature and biodiversity are prevalent. Interviewees voice their connectedness with their memories and experiences of nature and often express their concerns in terms of particulars rather than general or abstract descriptions. This is not always the case, of course. Some interviewees describe their interest in environmental matters in largely unspecific ways. However, the range and frequency of *de re* attitudes is notable. What does the prevalence of *de re* attitudes establish? One implication, which we will outline briefly, is that concerns about biodiversity may motivate us in the same way that *moral* concerns motivate us. A distinctive fact about our sincere moral judgements about what is right or good is that that they seem to be intrinsically motivational: to sincerely judge *x is good* is normally to be motivated to do *x* and to actually do *x* in appropriate circumstances. Moreover, our central moral judgements and values seem to be largely rooted in *de re* rather than *de dicto* concerns. It is particular persons, for

example, that seem to be the focus of many of our moral interests and subsequent motivations to act to help.

The moral philosopher Bernard Williams gives the following example: suppose that your spouse and a stranger both fell into a river putting their lives at risk. Who should you jump in to save? One does not normally, faced with such a situation, consider 'what would be the right thing to do in these



Vatnajökull National Park, Iceland

circumstances'; instead, one is motivated to act to save one's spouse. That is, one is motivated by a *de re* concern for one's spouse rather than a *de dicto* principle about what is proper to do in such situations. *De dicto* concerns seem more appropriate in the context of fungible commodities to which we have no distinctive historical or emotional ties: money, tools, and so on.

The apparent importance of *de re* attitudes towards the environment, therefore, suggests that our account of biodiversity motivations should be based upon a philosophical/psychological model of moral motivation.

A second consequence of the prevalence of *de re* attitudes about the environment is that methodologies that treat biodiversity as objects appropriate only for *de dicto* valuation face a serious challenge. They will fail to capture this essential component of our relationship to the environment and the value we find it in, as well as their motivational consequences. A case in point is the TEV approach to biodiversity valuation: the idea that the value of biodiversity can be completely grasped and expressed in economic terms, i.e. in total economic value. This TEV approach assumes that biodiversity is only valued in a *de dicto* sense and not also in a *de re* sense. This assumption is grounded in the notion of ecosystem services. It is the delivery of a service to humans such that their well-being is maintained or enhanced that is of value, and biodiversity is only valuable insofar as it helps secure the delivery of these services. If two constituents of biodiversity are able to deliver a service as effectively as one another, then their value is equivalent. This is a purely *de dicto* evaluation of biodiversity: constituents are valued not as distinct objects but for their satisfaction of various conditions. However, this view of its value misses the value that is to be found in the history and processes that brought that state about. Similarly, much other work on biodiversity, such as biodiversity offsetting and natural capital banking, assumes that biodiversity values are *de dicto*. That is, it is assumed that sites of biodiversity are not valued *de re* but can be treated as replaceable objects. One site of biodiversity, for example, can in principle be replaced (offsetting) by another site of biodiversity without loss of 'value'. An economic evaluation of biodiversity, therefore, will at best be incomplete: it will fail to capture critical respects in which we find it valuable and are motivated to act on it.

(This Findings for All was written by the UK team about data that was gathered by the whole BIOMOT team.)