ABSTRACT. P.T. Geach has maintained (see, e.g., Geach (1967/1968)) that identity (as well as dissimilarity) is always relative to a general term. According to him, the notion of absolute identity has to be abandoned and replaced by a multiplicity of relative identity relations for which Leibniz’s Law – which says that if two objects are identical they have the same properties – does not hold. For Geach relative identity is at least as good as Frege’s cardinality thesis – which he takes to be strictly connected with relative identity – according to which an ascription of cardinality is always relative to a concept which specifies what, in any particular case, counts as a unit. The idea that there is a close connection between relative identity and Frege’s cardinality thesis has been issued again quite recently by Alston and Bennett in (1984). In their opinion, Frege’s cardinality thesis is not only similar to relative identity – as Geach maintains – but it implies it. Moreover, they agree with Geach in claiming that a commitment to Frege’s cardinality thesis forces a parallel commitment to relative identity. Against Geach, Alston and Bennett we will claim that (T1): «Frege’s cardinality thesis is similar to relative identity» is false and that therefore (T2) «Frege’s cardinality thesis implies relative identity» is false as well.

KEY WORDS: ascription of cardinality, Frege’s cardinality thesis, Leibniz’s law, identity

Peter Geach in a series of papers (Geach 1957, 1962, 1967/68, 1973, 1980) has maintained that identity is always relative to a general term and that therefore the notion of absolute identity has to be abandoned and replaced by a multiplicity of relative identity relations. Which reasons – if any – militate in favor of the notion of relative identity? Geach’s answer to the question is that the reasons for it are the same which give aid and comfort to what he takes to be a strictly connected thesis, namely: Frege’s cardinality thesis, which claims that any numerical ascription implies a concept whose role is to specify the kind of objects to be counted, i.e. what, in any given case, has to be taken as a unity. “Frege emphasized” – Geach argues – “that ‘x is one’ is an incomplete way of saying ‘x is one A’ [...] or else it has no clear sense since the connection of the concepts one and the same comes out as much in the
German ‘ein und dasselbe’ as in the English ‘one and the same’ it has always surprised me that Frege did not similarly maintain the parallel doctrine of relativized identity” (Geach 1967/68, 3). As the quotation makes clear, by speaking of a strict parallelism between the two doctrines, Geach commits himself to the thesis (T1) that «Frege’s cardinality thesis is similar to relative identity».

A position very close to Geach’s has been held some decades ago by Alston and Bennett (1984) who have maintained not only, as Geach does, that (T1) Frege’s cardinality thesis is similar to relative identity, but the stronger thesis that (T2) Frege’s cardinality thesis implies relative identity. Even though their goal in defending (T2) was diametrically opposed to Geach’s – because they aimed at showing that Frege sinks with Geach in so far as Frege’s doctrine on cardinality implies Geach’s doctrine on relative identity (T2) and the latter is false – they nonetheless agreed with him in claiming that the parallelism between the two doctrines is so strong (an implication in their view) as to impose a double commitment. The aim of the paper is to analyze and criticize:

(T2) If Frege’s cardinality thesis holds then the relative identity thesis holds as well.

What is crucial to our argument is that since (T1) is not true, then (T2) is false as well.¹ We shall proceed in the following way:

1. We shall first illustrate the relative identity thesis and Frege’s cardinality thesis;
2. We shall analyze some alleged similarities between the two theses;
3. We shall criticize (T1);
4. We shall reject (T2).

SECTION 1

Let us first illustrate the main claims of the relative identity thesis. Let “a” and “b” be any two non-empty singular terms. According to the relative identity thesis one cannot judge whether “a is identical with b,” or whether a, for example, remains “the same” unless one adds some general term F.² Identity is a relation denoted by an expression of the form:

... is the same ... as ...

“Being the same token-word” and “being the same type-word” are examples of relative identities in a sentence as:

(1) The inscription ‘identity’ is the same type-word as the inscription ‘identity,’ but not the same token-word.