

Varieties of singularity

Abstract. Singularity in thought can be marked in many non-equivalent ways. Theses using the notion of singularity are thus best refashioned, so as to use instead the notions involved in one of the more precisely formulated marks. For example, one can ask whether every *thought built round a simple nominative concept* has *object-involving truth conditions*, where the italicized phrases allude to different marks of singularity. I say the answer is No. Or we can ask whether any *thought involving a non-empty mental file referring to an object* can be thought only by a thinker who is *acquainted with that object*. Again, I answer negatively. On the positive side, I endorse Harman's proposal that every *thought built round a simple non-empty nominative concept* has *object-involving truth conditions*. The converse does not hold, even in restricted form, since plurally object-involving truth conditions are often thought by means of complex nominative concepts (like list concepts or complex numeral concepts).

I: Different marks of singularity

Sally figures out, correctly, but on purely general grounds, that among all the spies there is a tallest and she goes on to believe that the tallest spy is tall. This is said to be an example of a general or non-singular thought. By contrast, if the tallest spy is Sally's familiar next door neighbor, known to the locals as Tom, and she thinks that Tom is tall, her thought is said to be singular.

The singular/non-singular contrast can be explicated in different ways, and differently connected with other distinctions. The list that follows is of contrasting pairs, the first member of each pair being closely related to singularity, the second to non-singularity. The earlier entries are more likely to be used to say what the distinction between singular and non-singular is, and the later ones are more likely to be theses concerning the distinction.

1. Sally's language of thought contains a simple mental nominative concept for Tom, which is exercised in her *Tom* thought. No mental name, or other mental analog of a

simple singular term in a public language, is exercised in her *tallest spy* thought. In its place is something complex. I give this the tag: *name-like-syntax*.

2. In her *Tom* thought she thinks of Tom directly, but in her *tallest spy* thought she thinks about him indirectly. If a thought is directly about an object, it obtains in virtue of an unmediated relation, say reference, between an element of the thought and the object. An indirect thought relates to its object, if any, in virtue of the object satisfying a condition contained in the thought.¹ Tag: *directness*.
3. Her *Tom* thought has object-involving truth conditions whereas her *tallest spy* thought does not. A thought has object-involving truth-conditions just if for some object, *x*, and every world, *w*, the truth at *w* of the thought depends on how things are with *x*.² Tom witnesses the existential quantification for object-involvingness, relative to Sally's *Tom* thought. Tag: *object-involving*.
4. Her *Tom* thought is based on her acquaintance with Tom. Although she is in fact acquainted with the tallest spy (who is Tom), her *tallest spy* thought does not depend on this relation. Tag: *acquaintance*.³
5. Her *Tom* thought is object-dependent but her *tallest spy* thought is not. An object-dependent thought is one such that, for some object, the thought could not exist if the object did not.⁴ Tag: *object-dependent*.
6. She knows who Tom is but doesn't know who the tallest spy is. She can individuate Tom as Tom, but not as the tallest spy. Tag: *knows-who*.

¹ Cf. Armstrong and Stanley (2011: 205) "Intuitively, a singular thought about an object *o* is one that is *directly about o* in a characteristic way – grasp of that thought requires having some special epistemic relation to the object *o*, and the thought is ontologically dependent on *o*". These authors add to directness (or perhaps explicate it in terms of) the conditions to be mentioned in (4) (special epistemic relation) and (5) (object-dependence).

² A witness does not have to be a necessary existent. One way to deal with the contingent case is to say that a thought does depend on an object for its truth or falsehood at a world at which the object does not exist, since its non-existence makes the thought false. There are other approaches, but the differences are irrelevant to the present discussion.

³ This view, though still prevalent (see discussion of Recanati below), has ancient origins. Compare: "... it appears that I cannot conceive of a thing in a singular fashion, unless it is pointed out to the senses". (John Buridan (f. 1330), quoted by Klima 2009: 74)

⁴ Cf. McDowell (1982: 303–4): "a singular thought is a thought which would not be available to be thought or expressed if the relevant object, or objects, did not exist".

7. Her *Tom* thought, but not her *tallest spy* thought, is properly reported in some “de re” style, for example: “concerning Tom she thinks that he is tall”; “there is someone she thinks is tall, namely Tom”. Tag: *de-re-report*.⁵

One could explore the relations between the different marks in various ways. For example, one could select one mark as constitutive of singularity, and go on to enquire what other marks, if any, are inevitably possessed by possessors of the favored mark. Or one might say that a singular thought is one possessing all or many of the marks, in which case the question may become whether there are any singular thoughts thus defined, or whether they form a category of any interest. Our heritage from Russell is closer to the second procedure. By lax standards, at least, he could be credited with holding that #1 through #6 align: we speak of just the same thoughts whether we describe them as ones using a simple mental name, ones that relate the thinker directly to the referent, ones with object-involving truth conditions, ones based on acquaintance, or ones that are object-dependent. Putting it in more Russellian terms: a logically proper name has *name-like-syntax*, has the distinctive referential *semantics* of a name, and so must *name* something, something on which the truth or falsehood of the thought *depends*, and using the name requires that one meet the *epistemic* condition of acquaintance with the object, ensuring that one *knows which* object one is thinking about..

I claim that the singularity properties are not equivalent: for any two properties, there are cases which come out as singular according to one but not according to the other. Whichever property one picks as definitive of singular thought, there will be no substantive true thesis to the effect that all and only singular thoughts have a distinct singularity property. Many of the properties are of interest in their own right; but the singular/non-singular contrast, unless defined just as one of the contrasts on the list, is of no deep significance. In this section I illustrate some putative failures of alignment of these various markers. In the next section I look more closely at the relation between #4 (*acquaintance*) and other marks.

⁵ Burge (1977: 51) uses the way a belief is ascribed to mark a feature of the belief itself: “a *de re* belief is a belief whose correct ascription places the believer in an appropriate non-conceptual, contextual relation to objects the belief is about”.

Mental representations probably come in various kinds. I will assume that thoughts make up one such kind, where a thought is a structure of concepts, rather as a public language sentence is a structure of words. This is clearly controversial, but as it is not typically controverted in discussions of singular thought, I will take it for granted.

The taxonomy of concepts is likewise controversial. Despite some skepticism, I will follow standard practice and use familiar taxa for public language expressions as a guide to conceptual taxonomy. The first division carves out those concepts capable of standing in the conceptual analog of subject-position: the nominative concepts. Among these, we can single out those that are simple, that is, have no parts that are concepts. Mental names, the conceptual analogs of linguistic proper names, are examples of simple nominative concepts, and give rise to the prime examples of thoughts with *name-like-syntax*. It's natural to expand the category to include some kinds of complex concept: complex demonstrative concepts, of the form THAT-F, list-like concepts, for example RUSSELL AND WHITEHEAD, and complex singular terms like TWENTY-SIX. There are interesting questions about possible further expansions, for example to the conceptual analog of bare plurals, or thoughts expressed using definite descriptions referentially; but these will be set aside here.

A thought can have *name-like-syntax* without having an object, as in the thought that Pegasus flies. Such a thought will not refer to an object directly (or indirectly), so will not be either *direct* or *indirect* (as intended in #2). Such a thought does not have object-involving truth conditions, is not based on acquaintance, is not object-dependent, and there is no object such that the believer believes of it that it flies. So, as well as lacking feature #2, the thought does not have the marks of singularity specified in #3 (*object-involving*), #4 (*acquaintance*), #5 (*object-dependent*), or #7 (*de-re-report*). The verdict of #6 (*knows-who*) is unclear. On one understanding, the thinker may know perfectly well what Pegasus is ("the flying horse belonging to Bellapheron"); understood another way, no one can know what Pegasus is.

A sentence using a rigidly designating definite description (an "entity-invoking" one, as intended by Peacocke 1975) has object-involving truth conditions. Suppose there are thoughts that combine these features, having conceptual complexity in nominative position

while being *object-involving*⁶. This immediately delivers one divergence between the kinds of singularity. Further, on many views, object-involving singularity may not guarantee *object-dependent* singularity (for perhaps thoughts do not have their truth conditions essentially, and so a thought's existence does not require the existence of the object upon which its truth conditions in fact depend). A third divergence is that *acquaintance* is not required for thoughts of this kind, and a fourth is that there perhaps is something "indirect" or satisfactorial about the relation between the nominative concept and its referent.

If one's central interest is in cognitive dynamics, *name-like-syntax* thoughts (#1) seem to form a perfectly sensible category, about which one might expect non-trivial generalizations, for example: subjects who have *name-like-syntax* beliefs are likely also to have corresponding existentially general beliefs, and in many cases ought to accept such a thought if the question arises. This would also be a good category to appeal to if one's interest were in anaphoric dependence in thought. In language there is an easy transition from a semantically complex indefinite to a semantically simple definite expression. In the classic example: "A man came into the bar. He ordered a martini" the simple singular "he" can be iterated indefinitely in subsequent sentences, and participants can successfully join a conversation without having ever encountered the initial indefinite. The "he" acquires autonomy. Indeed, it could at any point be used to introduce a name ("Walter, for so he was called, then sat down with a newspaper"). This suggests a common linguistic category, at some level, containing pronouns and proper names. If thought functions analogously, we can expect the category of thoughts with *name-like-syntax* to have explanatory value. In both cases, the taxonomy ignores the question whether the name-like element refers to anything.

There is a distinction analogous to that between singular and non-singular for plural thoughts. If a thought using a mental name thereby has a special status, then a thought using a list of such names should share that status. If my thought that Whitehead was a mathematician is singular, and so is my thought that Russell was a philosopher, my thought that Russell and Whitehead wrote *Principia Mathematica* should have a similar status.

⁶ Although this is certainly a possible combination for language, it is not obviously possible for thought. Despite the close connection between language and thought, few would go so far as to accept Reid's claim that "Language is the express image and picture of human thoughts" (1785; Woosely, ed: 29).

Following Hawthorne and Manley’s admittedly barbarous usage (2012: 39n4), I’ll call such thoughts “*plural-singular*”. The example shows that one central case, namely list-based thoughts, will be classified as singular in virtue of involving a complex of singular concepts, expressed by the list. These thoughts will share some features used to mark singularity while lacking *name-like syntax*.

If one’s central interest is in explaining action, one may have a special interest in the subcategory of *non-empty name-like-syntax* singularity, since these thoughts involve a relation between a thinker and an object, a relation that could well be of explanatory value in connection with action. This leads to potentially interesting links with the other characterizations. It’s natural to suppose that the semantics of thought will simply assign an object “directly” to a non-empty mental name (just as in standard philosophers’ style public language semantics). That seems sufficient for the thought to count as “directly” about its object (as in #2), and for this object to witness the quantification in the specification of object-involving truth conditions in #3. But non-empty *name-like-syntax* singularity will not guarantee *acquaintance* singularity (#4). Consider the analog for thought of the use of anaphoric pronouns. You may use an indefinite “An F” in thought though you are not acquainted with its satisfier; perhaps there is none. Still, there can be a chain of thoughts involving the analogs of simple dependent pronouns, in which you wonder whether it is G or H or whatever. These thoughts are singular, if we count by non-empty *name-like-syntax*, but by hypothesis you are not acquainted with their object. Someone anxious to get acquaintance into the story may further refine the appropriate subcategory of *name-like-syntax* singularity so as to exclude these cases. It’s unclear whether the result is of any interest, or is mere trivializing gerrymandering.

Many people have pointed out that *de-re-report* singularity (#7) may be satisfied by clear examples of thoughts that are non-singular by various standards, for example they lack *name-like-syntax* singularity. A nice example is suggested by Cian Dorr (2011: 946). The first two volumes of Hume’s *Treatise* were published anonymously in 1739. Many religious zealots, while not knowing who the author was, or indeed who Hume was, believed that the author was an atheist. An acquaintance of Hume could truly use a *de re* report in conversation with him: “The zealots believe you are an atheist”. Yet the zealots

could think of Hume only through such *non-name-like-syntax* means as “whoever wrote the *Treatise*”.⁷

Knowledge-wh is well-known to be highly context sensitive, so if singularity is supposed to be a relatively context-independent property, it will not be interestingly connected to *know-who* singularity (#6). Suppose a newspaper headline reads “Tallest spy arrested”. A friend might say to Sally: “I’ll bet you don’t know who Tom is” and Sally might sincerely reply “No. Who is he?”. It may then be revealed, to Sally’s astonishment, that Tom is the tallest spy and has just been arrested. Nothing prevents Sally from having *name-like-syntax* singular Tom-related thoughts both before and after the revelation. Hence one may have a singular thought concerning someone even though, relative to some context, one does not know who that person is.⁸ The converse also seems possible. You may know what will happen when the blue touch paper is lit (the rocket will take off), but many will say that you cannot have singular thoughts about this future event, and the thought may not have *name-like-syntax* with respect to the take-off. Despite this, knowledge-wh does seem to have played a part in informal descriptions of singularity (and has been used in the present paper, for example in describing the zealots). When Evans contrasts the “intimate” and “direct” “relation in which a man may stand to an object” with “thinking of an object by description: as one may think of a man, some African warrior perhaps, when one thinks that the tallest man in the world is thus and so” (Evans 1982: 64), one natural thing to suppose is that in the descriptive case the thinker does not know who he is thinking about, whereas in the “intimate” case he does, and much of Evans’s philosophy of reference is based on taking this thought very seriously.⁹ My own recommendation, however, is that we should simply drop *know-who* singularity (#6) on the grounds that it is too context-

⁷ Examples of this kind go back at least to Sosa (1970: 890). In a version of his example, higher command says the shortest soldier is to go first. If Shorty is the shortest soldier, the platoon commander can properly say that higher command has ordered Shorty to go first. (In Sosa’s actual example, the platoon commander addresses Shorty using “you”, making it just like Dorr’s example in the text above.)

⁸ Crane (2013: 152) gives a nice example: although in a general way I know who Tim Berners-Lee is (he is the inventor of the World Wide Web), at a social gathering at which I know he is present I may have to admit that “I do not know who he is”, since I don’t know what he looks like.

⁹ Evans defends Russell’s Principle “that a subject cannot make a judgement about something unless he knows which object his judgement is about” (1982: 89). “About” presumably introduces some pre-theoretical notion akin to singularity: otherwise it’s true that Sally can think about the tallest spy.

sensitive to have any chance of providing interesting connections with the other marks of singularity.

A methodological point emerges: we can't take intuitions of singularity seriously, as pre-theoretical data. True, there are agreed contrasting examples, like the one in the first paragraph of this paper (Tom/the tallest spy). But any serious attempt to describe the contrast between singular and non-singular carries one into deep theoretical territory, as the various potential marks of singularity reveal. For example, we cannot expect speakers to have *intuitions* relating directly to the question whether or not a thought is object-dependent. We would first need to explain the contrast between thought as representational vehicle and a distinct use of the word "thought" (a use avoided in the present paper), according to which it amounts to that which is thought, a proposition expressed by a thought in the first sense, and so roughly equivalent to truth conditions. Similarly, we cannot expect speakers to have *intuitions* about whether there is a language of thought, though most discussions of singular thought presuppose that there is. If we found that there were intuitions on these matters, we would have no reason to respect them. They are matters for theoretical discussion, not intuition.

II: Recanati's mental files and acquaintance

Mental files are thought-elements that generate *name-like-syntax* singularity. According to Recanati (2010, 2012) they essentially involve acquaintance. This harmonizes with Russell's desire to make "syntactic" features (mental files are syntactically distinctive elements of thought) suffice for semantic and epistemic ones (e.g. involving an object of acquaintance). One would expect the mental files view to entail that *name-like-syntax* singularity suffices for *acquaintance* singularity (#4), or something like it, contrary to what was affirmed in the previous section.

Mental files are non-descriptive modes of presentation of objects, primarily designed to provide a non-descriptive explanation of Frege cases (Recanti 2012: 34). They are based on acquaintance relations to objects, where an acquaintance relation is one that involves the flow of information. "The reference is the entity we are acquainted with (in the

appropriate way)” (35). “[S]ingular thoughts involve mental files based on some acquaintance relation to what the thought is about” (155). These remarks suggest that there can be no empty mental files, and no non-empty files in which the subject is not acquainted with the referent. But Recanati disavows both these apparent consequences. In a seemingly canonical statement of his position, he says:

1. The subject cannot entertain a singular thought about an object *a* without possessing, and exercising, a mental file whose referent is *a*.
2. To possess and exercise a mental file whose referent is *a* the subject must stand in some acquaintance relation to *a*. (155)

This allows for empty files, since condition (2) speaks only of non-empty files. And, according to Recanati, it also allows for cases in which the subject is not acquainted with the referent, even though there is one. That’s because (he says) the apparently metaphysical “must” in (2) should be interpreted as merely normative (156) – so the condition would be better expressed using “should”. Every file *should* have a referent with which the thinker is acquainted, but some files fail to meet this demand. Acquaintance is not required in order to create and use such files. And, of course, empty singular thoughts are countenanced: these are the ones which are singular because they involve a mental file, but empty because the file has no referent. Once we appreciate these aspects of his view, we will cease to expect it to deliver any straightforward connection between *name-like-syntax* singularity and *acquaintance* singularity.

The following three doubts are among those that can be raised about the files metaphor.

Explanation: Consider the formulation displayed above (1 and 2). What would be lost if we collapsed the conditions into a single one not mentioning mental files: To possess and exercise a singular thought about *a* the subject must stand in some acquaintance relation to *a*? Mention of files appears to do no work. Another aspect of the worry about explanatory value can be brought out by an example. Consider a case in which someone exclaims “A bear!” in response to tracks (as e.g. in Jeshion 2010: 117). Does the subject thereby introduce a mental file?¹⁰ To say that she does conflicts with the claim that a mental file

¹⁰ A discussion of specific indefinites would have been clarifying, but I did not find one in Recanati 2010 or 2012.

corresponds to a non-descriptive mode of presentation (“bear” is descriptive). To say she does not makes it hard to explain the behavior of the subsequent pronouns, which seem to correspond to non-descriptive modes of presentation (“Is it really a bear?” may be a perfectly appropriate contribution to this discourse). Mental files appear not to help to explain how the thinker passed from one kind of thought to another.

“In”: Information is said to be lodged or stored “in” mental files – indeed, that is what they are for. But what does that mean for the subject’s mental state? If the information that x is G is in some file F of mine (or the file labeled “ F ”), does this mean that I believe a thought whose subject term is (or refers to) F and whose predicate is $IS\ G$? Suppose it does. Then what am I supposed to do with what I regard as dubious information I receive concerning an object for which I have a file, information not currently worthy of belief? I need to store it somewhere, but storing it anywhere else than in the right file seems inappropriate. Suppose information can be in a file without my believing it true of the referent of the file. In that case, in virtue of what does the information count as “in” the relevant file? When I entertain the thought that a is F , must the information *being* F enter the file for a ? If so, does that mean I can entertain only thoughts I believe? If not, how are mental files involved as constituents of thoughts?

Empty files. Mental files are non-descriptive modes of presentation, characterized in terms of “epistemically rewarding” relations to objects. Allowing for empty cases requires allowing for modes of presentation with no object presented. Two empty files do not differ in point of mode of presentation: both will fail to present anything, and fail to engage any epistemically rewarding relation. It is therefore unclear how, from Recanati’s point of view, they can be distinct. Yet we wish the thought that Vulcan is Vulcan to differ from the thought that Vulcan is Pegasus, in which case the mental file VULCAN must differ from the mental file PEGASUS, even though both are empty, and so do not differ in terms of modes of presentation or acquaintance relations.¹¹

¹¹ Originalists like Sainsbury and Tye (2012) have a straightforward account of the distinction: the relevant thought-components are distinct because they differ in their originating events. In a puzzling remark, Recanati says that the difference between originalist accounts and his own is “primarily terminological” (2012: 245).

Recanati uses acquaintance to provide a functional characterization of mental files. The function of hearts is to pump blood; the function of mental files is to refer to objects with which the thinker is acquainted. A malformed heart *should* pump blood, even though it cannot. An empty mental file *should* have a referent (one with which the subject is acquainted) even if it does not. This preserves some connection between mental files in general and acquaintance, perhaps justifying his emphasized claim that “*singular thought is still defined in terms of acquaintance*” (164, italics in original), even though it prevents us using the presence or absence of acquaintance to determine whether some thought-element should count as a mental file.¹²

Even this weak connection between mental files and acquaintance is open to counterexample. Some mental files are introduced with the firm intention that they should be empty. An example is Oliver and Smiley’s ZILCH, for which they use the symbol “*O*”:

The point bears repeating: *O* is empty – it does not denote anything, whether existent or subsistent, real or imaginary, concrete or abstract, possible or impossible. It denotes zilch. (Oliver and Smiley 2013: 602)

O ought not to refer to anything, for that was the point of introducing the symbol. Yet presumably there is a corresponding empty file, and so, according to Recanati’s (2), ZILCH, and so *O*, ought to refer to something. So must we say that ZILCH both ought and ought not to refer to something? I doubt the coiners of the concept would be happy. “*O*” or “zilch” (or ZILCH) can be used in truths, for example “A ham sandwich is better than zilch” (Oliver and Smiley 2013: 602). This truth is singular with respect to zilch, by Recanati’s taxonomy, just like some of Leverrier’s thoughts using VULCAN. Yet there *should* be neither reference nor acquaintance of any kind.

A last point about empty cases. Recanati says “If reference is not achieved [as in the case of Vulcan], no singular truth condition is determined and the thought cannot be evaluated as true or false” (2012: 164). Assuming that a singular truth-condition is the same as an object-involving one, the first part of the claim is obviously correct. But the

¹² It is hard to know how firmly he is wedded to the emphasized claim, given that he also says that mental files may “acquire and serve *derived functions* whose fulfillment does not require acquaintance” (2012: 171); the norm can be suspended?

second part does not follow. Within some free logical frameworks, reference failure does not preclude evaluation of a thought as true or false.¹³

Descriptive names and acquaintance: The topic of descriptive names plays an interesting, but also a confusing, role in discussions of singularity in thought. On the face of it, descriptive names are oxymoronic: a (definite) description is by definition complex and a name is usually taken, by definition, to be non-complex. (List names, which are complex, tend not to surface in many philosophical discussions.) Hence there cannot be descriptive names, and so there is nothing to discuss.

A descriptive name is not merely a name introduced by means of a description. Such names can be perfectly ordinary. Rather, a descriptive name supposedly cannot shake off the descriptive baggage with which it is laden at its introduction, so that the thoughts expressed by such names are descriptive: “the thought expressed by ‘Julius is *F*’ may equivalently be expressed by ‘The inventor of the zip is *F*’”(Evans 1982: 50). But how is the initiator of a practice of using a descriptive name to ensure that the descriptive material is not dropped? Normally, learning a new name involves appreciating that the information that comes with it may not apply to the referent. One who encounters “Julius” in the ordinary way, by hearing others using it, may have no clue that it abbreviates a description in their mouths, even if the description is used in introducing the name (as is common with non-descriptive names). The novice will use the name as any other, and regard the sentence “Julius did not invent the zip” as one that might be true. Hence even if a name can for some brief moments within an idiolect preserve the features that make it descriptive in Evans’ sense, once it is out on the ocean of public use, these features will inevitably sink. There cannot be an enduring practice of using a descriptive name in public language.

The negative conclusion does not immediately transfer to thought, since a thinker is in a position to maintain an original stipulation. However, in this happier context, descriptive names seem incapable of giving rise to some new kind of thought. The explicitly descriptive characterization is presumably the best guide to the thought’s nature. So the thought is descriptive, lacks *name-like-syntax*, and may not be singular according to any of

¹³ According to Evans (1982: 36), a language with empty names requires a free logic.

the other marks. There is simply no room for a distinctive species of thought, one that is neither (or is it both?) descriptive or non-descriptive.

But let me set this skepticism aside to discuss Recanati's view directly. He tentatively suggests that a thought may have object-involving truth conditions even if the thinker is not acquainted with the object in question. He quotes an example of Jeshion's (attributed to David Velleman): an adopted child wonders what his biological mother is like, and spins many a fantasy round her. Recanati and Jeshion agree that the child can attain a singular thought about his mother (at this point in his discussion Recanati uses "thought-vehicle" to stress that the topic is the mental configuration, not the truth conditions, and so what's at issue is *name-like-syntax* singularity rather than *object-involving* singularity). The possibility of *name-like-syntax* singularity is beyond dispute. The disputed question is whether this *name-like-syntax* singular thought is object-involving (has "singular content") (i.e. is singular#3), and Recanati tentatively affirms that it is. To uphold the importance of acquaintance, he suggests that to achieve object-involving status, the thinker must "*at least* expect acquaintance and be right" (2012: 170). In terms of my categories, part of the claim is that some non-empty *name-like-syntax* singular thoughts in which the thinker is not acquainted with the referent nonetheless have *object-involving* singularity, but only in virtue of the thinker's correct expectation that she will become acquainted with the relevant object.

Recanati's position does not seem to me sustainable. The relevant expectation needs itself to involve only non-singular thought, else the question is begged. It would not do to require that the thinker think something expressible by "I expect I'll be acquainted with ...", where the gap is filled by an expression for the kind of concept that ensures *object-involving* singularity. This expectation would of course suffice for singularity, but it would be question-begging to suppose the thinker is capable of it. Hence the expectation must itself be a non-singular thought, possibly "I expect to become acquainted with whoever bore me". In this case, it seems entirely obvious that this is an optional extra, and cannot affect whether the subject's other mother-thoughts do or do not have object-involving truth conditions.

To make this plain, suppose two kids are talking – exchanging thoughts. Kid1 was adopted at birth, but speaks of his biological mother, using the mental file *MY MOTHER*, with high expectation that one day he will meet her. Kid2 thinks it extremely unlikely that either of them will ever meet her – for all they know, she is no longer alive. This does not make for miscommunication, though of course there is disagreement about the facts. When Kid1 says “My mother visited Colorado” and Kid2 agrees, they agree to the same thought. So if Kid1’s thought is object-involving, thanks to his sanguine expectation, so is Kid2’s, despite the lack of expectation. Hence the expectation of acquaintance is not required for thoughts of this kind.

A thought using a mental file may lack object-involving truth conditions (for the file may be empty), may fail to be object dependent, and may not require acquaintance with an object even in non-empty cases. Once this is recognized, perhaps a mental file is no more than a concept with *name-like-syntax*.

III: Object-involving truth conditions

Jeshion (2010) argues that singular thought does not require acquaintance. She gives three sets of examples. The first set consists of standard cases in which there is general agreement that thought is singular, and where, in addition, the thinker is acquainted with the object of her thought, as in a thought controlled by a perceptual demonstrative. The second set consists in cases which, she says, everyone will agree are non-singular, and where acquaintance is also lacking. Some theorists will rush to blame the lack of singularity on lack of acquaintance, but her third set of examples is intended to undermine that response. In the third set, the sample thoughts are said to be intuitively singular, even though the thinkers are not acquainted with their objects.

The shape of a thesis of this kind harmonizes well with the present paper’s aim to point to various non-equivalent notions of singularity. However, I think that there is an interesting connection between non-empty *name-like-syntax* singular thoughts and *object-involving* ones (to be argued for in the next section), but Jeshion’s second set of examples are said to be counterexamples to this thesis. Of the five alleged counterexamples, I will

discuss just two, Kaplan's "Newman 1", and "She" used in the parking ticket example. I think the other examples raise no further issues.

Kaplan (1989: 560n76) said that he could introduce the name "Newman 1" by the definite description "The first person to be born in the 22nd century".¹⁴ In his framework, this entails that one could have a singular thought concerning that person, perhaps expressed by the sentence "Newman 1 is likely to be Chinese". Jeshion claims that there is a "potent intuition" that no such sentence expresses a singular thought. The thought is uncontroversially *name-like-syntax* singular, and I'll assume that it is not empty. I will interpret Jeshion's intuition as entailing that the thought is not *object-involving*.

The only argument I can envisage for Jeshion's intuition is based on Grice's idea that one cannot produce a new kind of thought simply by making a "stroke of the pen" (Grice 1969: 140). In the case of "Newman1", one starts with a descriptive thought, supposedly without object-involving truth conditions, yet ends with a singular thought, that is, for Jeshion, one with object-involving truth conditions. The transition involves nothing more than an act of will – a stroke made by the inner pen. But supposedly this is impossible. However, it seems entirely possible to me, and the mechanism involved is easy to detail.

Definite descriptions used to introduce names often take wide scope. Suppose we are discussing the first child to be born in the 22nd century. Consider the sentence "The first child to be born in the 22nd century might easily not have been the first to be born – no doubt many children will be born in the first few seconds, and there's a lot of chance in the precise moment of one's birth". This is a perfectly acceptable contribution to the discussion, which it would not be if the modal operator took widest scope. If the first child were in fact a topic of discussion, it would be more natural to use a pronoun, for example "He or she might easily not have been the first to be born". But if a pronoun is acceptable, so also is a name. The conversation might continue "Let's call him or her Newman 1". Let's agree that the description itself ("the first child to be born in the 22nd century") is not rigid. But one can control, by stipulation or "a stroke of the pen", the scope it takes with respect to other

¹⁴ In fact Kaplan says 21st century, but since lying in the future is essential to the example I have updated it.

expressions. As Kripke said, a non-rigid description may be used to introduce a rigidly designating name.

“Newman 1” is not a “descriptive name” as this phrase is often used: it is not a name, N, which either merely abbreviates some definite description, the F, or at least requires for its correct use knowledge that the bearer of N is the F. As the conversation unfolds, someone might join it who was not present at the stipulation. By then the discussion has turned to robotic obstetrics, and the interest is in the degree of human supervision over such robots when they deliver babies. The newcomer to the discussion might speculate that by then (the time the newcomer takes to be at issue in the discussion) the idea of robots being supervised by humans will seem comical – it will be the other way about, and Newman 1 will probably be delivered either with no human intervention at all, or with human intervention monitored and controlled robotically. “That’s how things will be in the 23rd century”, our expert pontificates. He has made a mistake, but it is not the mistake of supposing that the first child to be born in the 22nd century was born in the 23rd century. He has used “Newman 1” with the reference it actually has, unaware of the description by which it was initially introduced. Only by saying this can we account for his being in error of a kind that does not constitute an explicit contradiction. Hence “Newman1” is not a descriptive name.

Thought mirrors language. Instead of describing the sentences used, I could have spoken of the thoughts expressed. A belief to which our expert is committed, a thought he has “in his belief box”, is that Newman 1 was born in the 23rd century. He does not have, in his belief box, the thought that the first child to be born in the 22nd century was born in the 23rd century. Hence these thoughts are distinct, and the Newman1 thought is not descriptive. The pattern of use suggests that it is object-involving.

Using the (mental or public) name rather than the description makes a difference in modal contexts. Whereas we should accept that the first child to be born in the 22nd century might not have been the first, we should not accept that it might have been the case that the first child to be born in the 22nd century was not the first to be born. On the other hand, we should accept that it might not have been that Newman 1 – *that baby* – was first to be born. It should not be surprising that an act of will, or a stroke of the mental pen, should make a

difference of relative scope or rigidity. This is something we can control, although, of course, we can thereby make a thought object-involving only if matters beyond our control cooperate (there needs to be an object).

I conclude that *Newman 1* thoughts have *object-involving* singularity in the absence of acquaintance. Alleged contrary intuitions may draw upon other marks of singularity.

Similar mechanisms are at work in the introduction of pronouns anaphorically dependent on indefinites. The property featured in the introducing indefinite does not hold in some necessary way of the object of the subsequent definite (“There’s a mosquito buzzing about our room. It’s keeping me awake.” “It’s not a mosquito. It’s a gnat.”), so the mechanism does not resemble that which people sometimes have in mind when they use the expression “descriptive name”. We also get the analogous modal distinction. While it could not be that a mosquito is not a mosquito, it could be that *it* is not a mosquito. The second speaker in the parenthetical example may be mistaken, but is not thinking a necessary falsehood.

Two cases might be indistinguishable to the thinkers, yet one but not the other a case of *object-involving* singularity. Suppose no one person invented the zip (it was born of committee discussions), so that “Julius” has no referent. If this is unknown to some group of people, their thoughts may be indistinguishable to them from object-involving thoughts. They might “intuit” a thought to be object-involving when it is not. Externalists will find nothing to surprise them in this consequence.

In the parking ticket example (Jeshion 2010: 115), we pass a car adorned with a parking ticket, and, pointing to the car, I exclaim “She’s going to be upset!”. Assuming that there is a single female owner of the ticketed car, this expresses a non-empty *name-like-syntax* singular thought, but Jeshion says that it is intuitively not singular. It may not be singular in the sense she is trying to develop, in which objects of singular thought need to be emotionally significant, but the present question is whether its truth conditions are object-involving.

It’s natural to understand the remark as elliptical for the claim that she’s going to be upset by getting a parking ticket. Call the car’s owner Sally. The question is whether the

truth of “She’s going to be upset” depends, at every world, on how things are with Sally. It certainly does so depend with respect to the actual world. If she is in fact not upset by the ticket, what was said is false. But what about non-actual worlds? Consider a world in which Sally owns no car. So it’s a world in which she is not upset by receiving a parking ticket. So it’s a world in which things are not as they were in fact said to be. Relative to this world, what was said is false. The thought is *object-involving*. In fact she was upset, but she might not have been, and would not have been if only she had sold the car sooner, as she had at one moment resolved to do. Like Newman¹, this example does not undermine the thesis that non-empty *name-like-syntax* thoughts are *object-involving*.

IV: Harman’s Thesis

Harman’s Thesis is that every non-empty case of *name-like-syntax* singularity is a case of singularity in a more demanding sense, specifically *object-involving* singularity. Having suggested that Jeshion’s examples do not undermine this view, I now aim to bring out another merit of the thesis.¹⁵

Harman gives expression to his view in the following passage:

Knowing that one and only one student will be elected president of the student association, Mary could always introduce a new mental name for that person into her system of mental representation, if she had any reason to. She could then form the thought about that person, John, that he will be elected president of the student association next year. (Harman 1977: 175)

“Being about” is Harman’s indicator of singularity, in particular, as I understand him, of *object-involving* singularity. Mary’s thought that one and only one student will be elected does not enable her to have a thought about that person, but forming a mental name for that person does. I hope my discussion in the previous section explains how I think this shift is effected: using a name makes for rigidity and so for scope insensitivity in modal contexts, features not guaranteed by the definite description or by the claim that a property

¹⁵ This is not inconsistent with the earlier claim that the original versions of singularity are not equivalent. For one thing, the relevant category is a proper subset of the name-like singular thoughts (the non-empty ones), so the connection that tempted Russell, between syntax and semantics, is broken. For another, there is certainly no equivalence: we saw that some thoughts corresponding to “entity-invoking” descriptions are object-involving but lack *name-like-syntax* singularity.

is uniquely satisfied. This is something over which a thinker has some control. As Harman says, if there is no unique satisfier, going through the same motions will not lead to a thought “about” anything. It’s not that we can create a thought that is object-involving at the stroke of the pen. But given that there is a suitable object, we can make it enter into truth conditions, and thus make a thought object-involving, by using the mental analog of a name or a pronoun for it. That much is within our control.

One advantage of this view is that, in not requiring anything like acquaintance, it makes room for the possibility of singular thought about abstract objects. Such objects are sometimes defined as ones that stand in no causal relations to anything, and acquaintance is standardly defined as a causal relation of one kind or another. Abstract objects include numbers, functions, pensions plans, and, on some views, fictional characters. The intuitive contrast with which I began, between thinking that the tallest spy is tall and thinking that Tom is tall, appears matched by the difference between thinking that the number of planets is prime and thinking that seven is prime.

Abstract objects are presumably necessary (that is, exist at every world) so we need to nuance the account of object-involving truth conditions. That there is an object on which, for every world, the truth or falsehood of a thought depends may hold in an unintended way, merely in virtue of the object’s necessary existence. For example, the thought that the product of 217 and 394 is less than the product of 217 and 395 is intuitively not singular with respect to the numbers denoted by the definite descriptions, even though, for every world, the truth of the thought depends on how things are with 85498 (and also with 85715). We need the distinction Kripke introduces in distinguishing *de facto* and *de jure* rigidity (1980: 21n21). As one might put it, true object-involvingness requires that there is an object concerning which it is a matter of meaning alone that for each world, the truth of the thought depends on it. Meaning alone is not what makes numbers necessary existents. So we can place in different categories thoughts in which numbers are referred to by concepts that are *de jure* rigid and thoughts in which numbers are referred to by concepts that are merely *de facto* rigid.

This gives rise to a potentially interesting connection between the syntax and semantics of thoughts about numbers. Suppose we say that an ordinary numerical concept

(say the concept TWENTY-SIX) may occur in a *name-like-syntax* thought, using an extended definition of syntactic simplicity as not involving generality. Definite descriptions for numbers, however, will count as involving generality, and so as not available in *name-like-syntax* thoughts. Then it seems that *name-like-syntax* thoughts about numbers will align with de jure object-involving thoughts about them, whereas thoughts about numbers effected through definite descriptions will only deliver de facto object-involving thoughts.

* * *

Reflecting on singular thought helps dispel some inherited prejudices. For example, it shows we must give up hankering after syntactic features of thought that can be counted on to guarantee an object-involving semantic feature. We must give up the supposition that a thinker has inner access to the truth conditions of his thoughts (for he might wrongly suppose a *name-like-syntax* thought to be *object-involving* when it is not). Even an outsider to a conversation involving a string of dependent pronouns may be unable to say whether or not the contributions do or do not have object-involving truth conditions (depending, in the simplest case, on whether the initial head of the anaphors was or was not empty). We should also reconsider the role we ascribe to acquaintance, shaking free of its origins in a naïve concept-empiricism. We can form concepts for things with which we are not acquainted that are every bit as “good” as the concepts we form for things with which we are acquainted. Thought can get to places that cognition cannot.

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