Varieties of singularity

Abstract. What is it for a thought to be singular? I argue that there is no single answer. Singularity in thought is associated with a variety of non-equivalent features. We should simply address these features, and the relations between them, rather than try to select one among them as a key to what a "real" singular thought is.

I: Marks of singularity

Sally figures out, correctly, but on purely general grounds, that among all the spies there is a unique 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 of features, 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. My main claim is that, although often co-present in a given thought, the marks are largely independent, and this may explain some of the disagreements about the "nature of singular thought". If I am right, there is no single nature, but rather various non-equivalent features.

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, via concepts like TALL and SPY. 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, but nothing witnesses it for her *tallest spy* 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]

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[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 given as #4 (special epistemic relation) and #5 (object-dependence). The directness condition plays a minor role in the present paper; otherwise, as Rachel Goodman pointed out, it would have been worthwhile to distinguish different ways of explaining it: psychological, epistemic or semantic.

[2] This is Peacocke's characterization of rigidity (1978: 117), which he applies to proper names, demonstratives, and "entity-invoking" uses of definite descriptions, and which, he says, can give precision to vaguer notions like "simply referring" and "tagging".
   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.
   If rigidity is the projection onto all worlds of reference at the actual world, empty names are rigid (Sainsbury 2005: 76–7). But thoughts with empty mental names are neither object-involving as defined in #3, nor object-dependent as defined in #5.

[3] This view, though still prevalent (see discussion of Recanati in §4 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).

5. Her *Tom* thought is object-dependent but her *tallest spy* thought is not. An object-dependent thought is one such that, for some relevant 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-wh*.

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 select one mark as constitutive of singularity, and go on to enquire what other marks, if any, are invariably 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 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. 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 both the existence and 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

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[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".

[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".

true thesis to the effect that all and only singular thoughts with this property also possess all the other singularity properties. 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 the coming section (§2) I illustrate some failures of alignment of these various marks. In §3 I consider some taxonomic aims that might inform the discussion. In §4 I look more closely at the relation between mental files and the marks of singularity. The final two sections offer more detailed exploration of some theses of connections among the marks.

Mental representations 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. I will follow standard practice and use familiar taxa for public language expressions as a guide to conceptual taxonomy. The first division, the one most relevant to the present topic, carves out those non-quantificational 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 prime examples of simple nominative concepts, and give rise to the salient examples of thoughts with *name-like-syntax*.

If, like Russell, one wishes syntactic categories to reflect semantic ones, one might be tempted to expand this category to include some kinds of complex nominative concepts: complex demonstrative concepts, of the form THAT-F, list-like concepts, for example RUSSELL AND WHITEHEAD, and complex singular terms like TWENTY-SIX; or even rigid definite descriptions. But this would show just the kind of drifting between different considerations that this paper aims to eschew.

2: Some inequivalences

(a) #1 (name-like syntax) does not entail #2 (directness), #3 (object-involvingness), #4 (acquaintance), #5 (object-dependence) or #7 (de-re-report)

A thought can have *name-like-syntax* without having an object, as in the thought that Pegasus flies.[6] 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 is not suitably 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 #4 (*acquaintance*), #5 (*object-dependence*), or #7 (*de-re-report*). Even though the thought that Pegasus flies is true at a world iff some object is referred to by the concept PEGASUS and satisfies the concept FLIES, it does not follow that the thought has object-involving truth conditions. The condition for object-involvingness is that there is an object (that is, there *actually* is an object) such that, for each world, the truth of the thought depends on how things are with that object, and there is no such object. So #1 (name-like syntax) does not ensure #3 (object-involvingness).

The verdict on #6 (*knows-wh*) 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.

(b) #3 (object-involvingness) does not entail #1 (name-like syntax), #2 (directness), #4 (acquaintance),or #5 (object-dependence)

A thought expressed by a sentence with a rigid non-empty definite description in subject position has object-involving truth conditions. For example, there is an object, namely Aristotle, such that "The actual teacher of Alexander was fond of dogs" is true at a world iff that object was fond of dogs at that world. But such a thought lacks #1 (name-like syntax), #2 (directness), #4 (acquaintance), and #5 (object-dependence) (since the thought could exist even if no one had taught Alexander).

As in other examples, the status of #6 is unclear, but there's a case for saying that you don't know who the teacher of Alexander was unless you bring to bear the concept ARISTOTLE: you know it was Aristotle.

(c) #7 does not entail other marks

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[6] Burge (2010: 42) "A singular thought … can fail to refer to anything". Roughly, Burge's use of "singular thought" treats it as a thought with name-like syntax.

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. Cian Dorr (2011: 946) invites us to consider that, on the anonymous publication of the first two volumes of Hume's *Treatise* in 1739, some 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're an atheist"; or more ponderously: "The zealots believe, concerning you, that you're an atheist". Yet the zealots could think of Hume only through such non-*name-like-syntax* means as "whoever wrote the *Treatise*".

3: Taxonomic goals

If one's central interest is in cognitive dynamics, *name-like-syntax* thoughts (#1) may 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.

This line of thought suggests that #1 forms too narrow a category, on account of the similarities between name-like syntax and more complex syntactic structures, for example indefinite noun phrases, as mentioned in the previous paragraph. To move to a different

kind of case, 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, not differing fundamentally from that of the separate thoughts the more complex one combines. In Hawthorne and Manley's admittedly barbarous usage (2012: 39n4), such thoughts are "*plural-singular*". The example shows that one central case, namely list-based thoughts, might 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*. The moral is that different taxonomies may serve different theoretical purposes.

If one's central interest is in explaining action, one may pay special attention to 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). Applying to thought an analog of the use of anaphoric pronouns, mentioned in §2 above: you may use an indefinite "An F" in thought though you are not acquainted with its satisfier, and 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.

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-wh* singularity (#6). Suppose a newspaper headline reads "The 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.[7] 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.[8] My own recommendation, however, is that we should simply drop *know-wh* singularity (#6) on the grounds that it is too context-sensitive to have any chance of providing interesting connections with the other marks of singularity. It's not merely that *knows-wh* judgments can vary across rather similar contexts, but that the same token case may appropriately elicit different judgments, as a function of the interests of the judges.

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[7] 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.

[8] 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.

Although there is widely supposed to be an intuitive distinction between singular and non-singular thought, as exemplified in the first paragraph of this paper (Tom/the tallest spy), it has also often been recognized that there are conflicting intuitions about specific cases. In the disputed cases, there is simply a clash of intuitions. Here's an explanation: the intuitively agreed cases are those that meet all or most of the varieties of singularity I have identified. This fact leaves us in the dark about which of the seven features people are responding to when they judge a thought to be singular. And the disputed cases show that different subjects attach different weights to the different and largely independent features. The features themselves are typically not appropriate topics for direct appeal to pretheoretic intuition, since they involve theoretical notions like the language of thought, and somewhat unobvious distinctions like that between object-involvingness and object-dependence. The taxonomy offers the theorist a more refined take on a topic in which many distinct considerations are at work.

4: Recanati's mental files and acquaintance

According to François Recanati, mental files are non-descriptive modes of presentation of objects. Their main theoretical justification is to provide a non-descriptive explanation of Frege cases. They are based on acquaintance relations to objects, where an acquaintance relation is one that involves the flow of information in a way that can generate knowledge, and they have the following features:

> they are "mental counterparts of singular terms" (Recanati 2012: 34)
> "The reference [of a mental file] is the entity we are acquainted with (in the appropriate way)" (2012: 35);
> "singular thoughts involve mental files based on some acquaintance relation to what the thought is about" (2012: 155).

As Recanati appreciates, one might be tempted to suppose that his view is that singular thought requires acquaintance, so that he would be an advocate of mark #4. But he also allows for singular thought without acquaintance, which is incompatible with treating all singular thoughts as requiring acquaintance:

the phenomenon of acquaintanceless singular thought seems incompatible with my claim that singular thoughts involve mental files based on some acquaintance relation to what the thought is about. (2012: 155)

However, he goes on to explain that the apparent incompatibility is merely apparent: his final view is that a singular thought need not depend on the existence of an acquaintance relation to any object specific to that thought. This emerges in his gloss on a canonical statement of his position:

> 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*. (2012: 155)

According to Recanati, (2) 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 non-empty file *should* have a referent with which the thinker is acquainted, but some files fail to meet this demand, either because there is no appropriate object, or because, although there is such an object, the thinker is not acquainted with it.[9] Although acquaintance is not required in order to create and use such files, it nonetheless plays an essential role: it explains the function of mental files in general. "[A]cquaintance is involved in the very concept of a singular thought" (165), not because every singular thought involves acquaintance, but because of a connection between the concept SINGULAR THOUGHT and the concept ACQUAINTANCE: "*singular thought is still defined in terms of acquaintance*" (164, italics in original). Hence we would not expect file theory to underwrite the claim that every example of *name-like-syntax* singularity is also one of *acquaintance* singularity.

The weaker relation is best described once we have in place a distinction between thought-vehicle and thought-content (165). The vehicle is a concept or conceptual structure; the content is a truth condition. A mental file is a vehicle, and "a singular vehicle, qua type, is individuated in terms of its function, which is: the storing of information gained

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9 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?

through acquaintance" (163–4). The opening of a mental file requires acquaintance or expected or imagined acquaintance (167–8). Hence a mental file cannot be deployed to think a singular thought unless the subject either is acquainted with a suitable object or is right to expect to become so (164–5). Hence the *successful* employment of a singular vehicle, its employment to think a singular thought in the sense of thought-*content*, does require acquaintance, either at the time of opening the file or subsequently.[10]

Although I am somewhat skeptical about the explanatory role of the mental files metaphor in general, I will confine my comments to the issue of their relation to acquaintance.

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]

Deliberately empty files. Recanati claims that there's a norm (2 above) according to which one should not employ an empty file if one is successfully to think a thought. But there are counterexamples. Some mental files are introduced with the firm intention that they should be empty. A clear case is Oliver and Smiley's ZILCH, for which they use the symbol "*O*":

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[10] Recanati says that unsuccessful thought-vehicles, ones that do not enable the thinking of thought-contents, are not evaluable as true or false. This overlooks free logical semantics which, according to Evans (1982: 36), are required for an adequate semantic description of languages containing empty names.

[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). His files theory has no access to individuation by origin.

> 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 norm, 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 thought-vehicle 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.

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 semantically 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. How should one describe descriptive names so that they constitute a useful category?

A descriptive name is not merely a name introduced by means of a description. Such names can be perfectly ordinary, as when expectant parents plan to call their baby "Jack". Subsequent users of "Jack" need know nothing of his parents or their plans. In general, subsequent uses, though they normally need to reflect the referent of a reference-fixing description, need not be guided by, or otherwise involve, the description itself. By contrast, a descriptive name supposedly cannot shake off the description with which it is linked at its introduction, so that the thoughts expressed by such names are descriptive. Assuming that

"Julius" is a descriptive name, "the thought expressed by 'Julius is *F*' may equivalently be expressed by 'The inventor of the zip is *F*' "(Evans 1982: 50).[12]

The best elaboration known to me of Evans' conception of descriptive names like "Julius" is by Davies and Humberstone (1980: 7):

> (i) "Julius" is sufficiently similar to an ordinary proper name to be regarded as a referring expression, even though definite descriptions are not regarded as referring expressions.
> (ii) One can understand sentences containing "Julius" without knowing of any object that it is being said to be thus and so.

As they put it: a descriptive name has the epistemic features we associate with definite descriptions (ii), but the semantic features we associate with proper names (i).

I think there are no descriptive names in natural languages. There is no mechanism whereby the initiator of a practice of using a descriptive name could ensure that subsequent users are aware of the descriptive material. 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 (metaphysically) 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.

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[12] Some authors (including Dickie, Reimer & Howard, and King in this volume) use the notion of *descriptive name* in a weak sense, which corresponds to Evans' first mention of the notion: a name introduced by a reference-fixing stipulation (1982: 31). When Evans subsequently comes to give full attention to this category, in the section entitled "Russellian singular terms and descriptive names", he is explicit that he is appealing to a much stronger condition: "Anyone who understands the name must be aware of the reference-fixing role of the description" (1982: 48). The weak condition is semantically entirely uninteresting, since *how* a reference for a name is originally secured, as opposed to *what* the name is originally introduced to refer to, may have no impact on its subsequent use (as stressed by Recanati 1993: 180). When I use the phrase "descriptive name" I use it in Evans' strong sense: users must have the reference-fixing descriptive condition in mind. In the text that follows, I argue that it would be hard, and I think impossible, for someone who introduced a name as a descriptive one to ensure that subsequent users had the description in mind when they used it.

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 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.

Recanati regards descriptive names as posing a threat to his position, so he might welcome my skepticism. But I'll set it aside, so as to enter into the problematic as he sees it. In his chapter on descriptive names (ch 12), he 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 entertain a "singular thought" about his mother where, at least for Recanati, this means a thought with name-like syntax, a feature which Recanati identifies by stressing that what's under discussion is a "thought-vehicle" (as opposed to a "thought-content", which is a truth condition). The possibility of *name-like-syntax* singularity is beyond dispute. The disputed question is whether this *name-like-syntax* singular thought is object-involving (#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.

This position does not seem to me sustainable. The relevant expectation needs itself to involve only non-singular thought, else the question short-circuits. 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 gave birth to me". In this case, it seems entirely obvious that this expectation 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 friends are talking – exchanging thoughts. Sam 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. Sue 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 Sam says "My mother visited Colorado" and Sue agrees, they agree to the same thought. So if Sam's thought is object-involving, thanks to his sanguine expectation, so is Sue's, despite her 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, a mental file appears to be no more than a concept with *name-like-syntax*.[13]

5: 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

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[13] There also seem to be empirical objections to the mental file view, taken as an empirical hypothesis about how information is organized. According to the view, a proper name is associated with an information-containing file. In that case, one would expect that access to the information would typically pass through exercise of the proper name in thought (the file's "label"). However, it seems that many people are much better at associating information with a person's face than they are at retrieving the person's name, suggesting that information is not always accessed through a name-labeled file; and are often good at recalling a person while forgetting the person's name (see e.g. Young et al 1986). We are all also familiar with mistakes like calling the new pet by the name of the deceased one, which again suggests that the use of the name is guided by descriptive material, rather than being a route to it. Taking the mental file view seriously would require knowing what it predicts about cognition.

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 two, Kaplan's "Newman 1", and "She" used in the parking ticket example. I think the other examples raise no distinct 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 basis I can envisage for Jeshion's intuition is based on Grice's idea that one cannot produce a new kind of thought simply by a "stroke of the pen" (Grice 1969: 140; Recanati (2012: 148–9) also takes this consideration seriously). 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: one resolves to use "Newman 1" for whoever is born first in the 22nd century.

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

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

"Newman 1" is not equivalent to a definite description since (a) it is rigid, whereas the relevant definite description is not, and (b) it does not require for its correct use knowledge that its bearer is the first child to be born in the 22nd century. Hence it is not a descriptive name in the interesting sense of that phrase. 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", says the newcomer. 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 "Newman 1" 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 mistaken newcomer 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 may not hold of the referent 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 we do not have a descriptive name (in the strong sense). We also get the analogous modal distinction. While it could not be that a mosquito is not a mosquito, it could be that *it* (as used in the reply) 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 emerged from

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 terms of the mark Jeshion 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.

Call the car's owner Sally. It's natural to understand "She's going to be upset" as truth-conditionally equivalent to the claim that Sally is going to be upset by getting a parking ticket. The question is whether the truth of the remark 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, so that another driver received the ticket. Like Newman1, this example does not undermine the thesis that non-empty *name-like-syntax* thoughts are *object-involving*.

6: 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 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 truths conditions, and thus make a thought object-involving, by using the mental analog of a name or a pronoun for it. That way of producing object-involvingness is under 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, pension 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.

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[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, and thoughts with list names, are object-involving but lack *name-like-syntax* singularity.

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. The difference is intuitive, and the present perspective offers theoretical vindication.

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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.[16]

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