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Singular Thought: Making the Most of the Notion

Although the notion of *singular thought* (or *de re thought*) occupies a central place in twentieth century philosophy of mind and language, something serious has gone wrong in the literature on the topic. By and large, discussions of singular thought have lost touch with the reasons why the notion is interesting and important. The broadest aim of this dissertation is to bring the notion of singular thought back into contact with the philosophical questions and problems that make it important and, thereby, to show what it would *be* to make the most of a notion that can do important philosophical work.

In short, the view defended in this dissertation is that we should think of singular thought as the answer to a question about the intentionality or contentfulness of thought and that, in doing so, we also make singular thought a legitimate theoretical notion for the philosophy of mind. The question to which singular thought supplies the answer is one of the most basic in the philosophy of mind: what explains the fact that our thoughts are about the world around us? Or, put in slightly different terms: How is it that the world and its objects come to be the subject matter of thought? In the dissertation, we see that we *need* singular thought to play the role of answering this question—the question cannot be answered without it. We also see that, if singular thought *is* to play this role in a larger theory of mind, this places important constraints, both methodological and substantive, on our account of the phenomenon.

The view that singular thought can play a central role in answering the above question about intentionality is not unconventional exactly; it is just that

philosophers have failed to follow through on it. It is often suggested that singular thought ‘supplies the content for thought’, and anyone who spends a lot of time thinking about singular thought will get the impression that many theorists have this idea somewhere in the back of their minds. The problem is that, despite this, most of them go on to address the topic in a way that prevents them both from engaging in a serious and systematic inquiry into *how* singular thought plays the role of supplying the content of thought, and also from giving an account of singular thought that is even consistent with it playing this role.

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The least controversial gloss on the distinction between singular and general thought is that it is a distinction between mental states with different kinds of *content*.¹ A singular thought is a mental state with singular content, a general thought has general content. The difference between singular and general content is that, where general content involves only properties and quantifiers, singular content involves either particular objects themselves or terms whose semantic role is to contribute particular objects.² Therefore, singular content constitutively involves³ particular objects, whereas general content does not. Take the contents represented by (1) and (2):

- 1) $(\exists y) [(American\ President(y) \rightarrow born\ in\ America(y))]$
- 2) $born\ in\ America(a)$

¹ We can think of contents as structures, abstract entities that have truth-conditions. Thus, in specifying the content of a mental state we specify its truth-conditions and its intentional properties.

² Thus, adopting a distinction between singular and general content does not rule out that these terms also contribute, for example, modes of presentation of the particular objects they contribute. I am not committing here to a Russellian conception of singular content. My aim above is to make a semantic distinction (where ‘semantic’ is used to mean *truth-conditional*) whilst staying neutral about issues regarding the metaphysics of content. In fact, my sympathies lie with a Fregean account of singular thought content but, for my purposes in the dissertation, I do not need to argue for, or commit to this view.

³ Talk of ‘constitutive involvement’ again allows for neutrality over whether the contents contain objects themselves or object-dependent concepts or terms.

The content of (1) could be expressed in English with the sentence, ‘All American Presidents are born in America’. Assuming that ‘*a*’ is an individual constant that refers to Barack Obama, (2) could be expressed with ‘Barack Obama was born in America’. (2) constitutively involves a particular object, whereas (1) does not. There is also a limiting case of general content, in which a content picks out a particular object *o* (*in that o uniquely satisfies a descriptive condition laid out by the property terms contained in the content*) but the content still does not constitutively involve that object. (3) is an example:

3) $\Box x [44^{\text{th}} \text{ President } (x) \ \& \ (\Box y) (44^{\text{th}} \text{ President } (y) \rightarrow (x = y)) \ \& \ \text{born in America}(x)]$

It could be expressed with the sentence, ‘The 44th President was born in America’. Since Barack Obama is the 44th President, what makes both (3) and (2) true at the actual world is that Barack Obama was born in America,⁴ but unlike (2), (3) does not constitutively involve Barack Obama. The truth-conditions of (2) are singular whereas those of (3) are general.

This definition, whilst largely uncontested, settles very little about the nature of singular thought. What we do by saying that singular thoughts are mental states with singular content is to draw a distinction between two kinds of semantic content and say that some mental states have one kind and other mental states have the other. But, since our topic is mental states themselves we don’t really have the defining features of the phenomenon in view without some discussion of epistemological

⁴ The truth or falsity of (3) at other worlds will depend on how things are with different objects at those worlds, depending on who is the 44th President at those worlds. Since (2) constitutively involves Obama, it always depends for truth or falsity on Obama. Of course, there is a possibility of a case that is general (does not constitutively involve an object in its content) but is also dependent on the same object for truth or falsity at all worlds. Mathematical descriptions will generate such cases.

questions⁵—that is, questions of what is involved in grasping singular as opposed to general content. Consensus over the concept of singular thought dissolves when we turn to these issues

The central debate in the literature on singular thought is about the conditions under which it is possible to entertain a singular thought, and the nature of the abilities involved in doing so.

The most traditional account of the epistemology of singular thought comes from Russell: In order to entertain a singular content about an object, one must be *acquainted* with that object. However, Russellian acquaintance is a highly demanding relation involving unmediated, infallible access to an object—it provides indefeasible knowledge of the thing's existence and rules out the possibility of identity mistakes concerning it. This means that, on the Russellian view, ordinary external objects cannot be the objects of singular thoughts. In order to accommodate the possibility of singular thoughts about ordinary external objects, current theorists replace Russellian acquaintance with a range of epistemic-cum-psychological constraints on singular thought, including a causal requirement on singular thought, the requirement that the thinker know which object she is thinking about, or the requirement that the thinker have and maintain a mental file on the object of thought.

What is true of most of these accounts is that they involve commitment, in some form or other, to a 'thicker' conception of singular thought than the very neutral 'semantic' one (a singular thought is a mental state with singular content) that we

⁵ It should be noted that I use the term 'epistemological question' in a broad way. What I mean when I say that some discussion of epistemological questions is required is not so much that what is required is some discussion of *knowledge* in particular, but rather some discussion of what it is required to grasp singular as opposed to general content, or of what sorts of conceptual/epistemic/cognitive facts must be true of an agent in order for her mental state to be appropriately represented as having singular, rather than general, content. The same kind of point applies to terms like 'epistemology of singular thought' & 'epistemic relation'.

started with. The thought behind most accounts is that what distinguishes singular from general thought is not *just* the difference in the content of these states but some special relation towards an object that *underpins* this difference in content—which explains the subject’s being in a position to entertain a singular content.⁶

In the dissertation, I mark the commitment to a thicker conception of singular thought by saying that theorists to who adopt it hold that there must be a *non-semantic constraint on singular thought*. This means they hold that, in order for a subject *s* to entertain a singular thought about an object *o*, *s* must stand in some special non-semantic relation to *o*. The question is, what is the nature of this relation? The literature of late has involved a steady trend towards ‘loosening’ the epistemic and psychological constraints on singular thought—that is, a steady loosening of the non-semantic constraint on singular thought.

In the dissertation, I argue for three central claims about this. Firstly, I argue that this loosening is motivated by a widely shared but fundamentally misguided assumption. Secondly, in most cases, the resulting epistemology of singular thought is in fact inconsistent even with the minimal definition of singular thought that most theorists begin with (that is, that singular thoughts are mental states with singular content). Thirdly, by recognizing that singular thought can and must play a special role in our account of the intentionality of thought, we provide a theory of singular thought that answers to demands placed on the theory by the neutral definition, and also motivate the existence of the category of singular thought from the perspective of the theory of mind.

A large part of what drives the steady trend of loosening the epistemology of

⁶ I want to note here that, by grouping all the above proposals together according to their commitment to the idea that

singular thought in the literature is intuitions that certain sorts of cases must be accommodated. An example is the fact that the orthodoxy is now not merely that, whatever the non-semantic constraint on singular thought is, it must allow for the possibility of singular thoughts about medium-sized material objects (thus, entailing that we need a constraint that is looser than Russellian acquaintance), but that it must also vindicate the intuition that an individual can think singular thoughts about objects she has never encountered personally. For example, almost all proposals for how we should construe the non-semantic constraint on singular thought take it as necessary that any viable filling out of the constraint will accommodate the intuition that there are *communication-based* singular thoughts; in particular, thoughts passed on through the use of communication involving names.⁷

What makes this intuition seem obligatory (and drives the ‘loosening’ trend) is the widespread tendency in the literature to pursue questions about the epistemology of singular thought by looking to the behaviour of devices of singular reference in natural language. We could call this the *linguistic approach* to singular thought.

Guiding the linguistic approach is the assumption that there must be a general correspondence between contents in the two realms of natural language and thought.⁸ We could call the particular version of this assumption that appears in the literature on singular thought *the tracking assumption*, and state it as follows:

(Tracking Assumption) The behaviour of natural language devices that *express* singular content systematically tracks the behaviour of singular content in *thought*.⁹

⁷ In fact, the current orthodoxy is that there are three ways for the epistemic constraint on singular thought to be satisfied and, therefore, three ways to have a singular thought about an external object: Perception, testimony and memory.

⁸ There is more to say about this issue. In particular, we might want to distinguish between semantic or *linguistic* competence, and the kind of general competence required for communication.

⁹ It is important to distinguish both the tracking assumption and the linguistic approach to singular thought from two other claims, which I do not need to reject: The first is the claim that mental states and sentences or utterances have the same *kind* of content. The second is the claim that the contents

If the tracking assumption is illegitimate (and, I argue in the dissertation that it is), then the linguistic approach to singular thought loses much of its support. Furthermore, this means that we should rethink the trend towards looser accounts of the epistemology of singular thought, to the extent that they are built around accommodating intuitions that derive from the tracking assumption.

The argument against the tracking assumption in the first part of the dissertation proceeds by considering in detail two ways that the assumption exerts influence on the literature on singular thought. The first is in the assumption that the truth of attitude ascriptions that relate agents to singular contents (what we can call *singular ascriptions*) entails that the attributees mental states are singular. The second is the assumption that thoughts attached to communication involving proper names must be singular. In both cases, I argue that the tracking assumption generates problematic conclusions about the epistemology of singular thought *and* that there are independent reasons to think the assumption is false.

The *tracking assumption for attitude ascriptions* is the following:

(*The tracking assumption (for attitude ascriptions)*) An attitude ascription which states that s Φ 's that P is true iff s has an attitude, of Φ -ing, which is an *entertaining* of the content P

Many theorists have used this assumption as an implicit or explicit part of their reasoning about the epistemology of singular thought. However, what we see in Chapter 1 is that this leads either to a complete collapse of the distinction between

of mental states will inevitably be represented through the use of language (either formal or natural). In defense of this second claim, it might be argued that language has the expressive resources to successfully map or represent the kind of intentional properties possessed by mental states. This may be right, but it is not the claim made by the proponent of the tracking assumption. The tracking assumption claims that the content of a particular mental state can be read off the content of the natural language expressions used to express it or attribute it in ordinary contexts.. This is different to saying that, if we are interested in representing the properties of the mental state, there is some sentence in a formal or natural language which will provide us with the best way of doing this.

singular and general thought, or to an account whose commitments are inconsistent with one another. Furthermore, a closer look at the behavior of attitude ascriptions gives us independent reason to think that the tracking assumption for attitude ascriptions is false. Thus, at the end of Chapter 1, we find ourselves with reason to rethink any theory that argues for a loosening of the epistemic constraints on singular thought by relying on data from singular attitude ascriptions.

In Chapter 2, we turn our attention to a second, but just as pervasive, way that the tracking assumption exerts influence on the literature on singular thought. This is through the assumption that, in order to take part in successful communication involving a proper name, a thinker must entertain a singular thought about the name's referent. This gives rise in the literature to the assumption that communication involving a proper name is a sufficient condition on entertaining singular thoughts about the name's referent that would have been otherwise unavailable. Here, I argue that both of the two main ways of fleshing out *how* communication with names is meant to enable singular thought fail to satisfy basic desiderata on a theory of singular thought. This leads to the more general conclusion that what I call the *NBT thesis* (names-based thought thesis) involves a confusion about order of explanation. Rather, I suggest we should give up this thesis in favour of a different account of what it takes to understand an utterance of a sentence containing a proper name.

The conclusions of Part I of the dissertation (comprising Chapters 1 & 2) are as follows. The tracking assumption leads to accounts of the epistemology of singular thought that either unwittingly violate the non-semantic constraint on singular thought, or give it up self-consciously. In the case of theories that violate the

constraint unwittingly, the resulting account is unstable or inconsistent. In the case of theories that simply give up this constraint, this leads to a collapse of the very distinction (between singular and general thought) these theories are trying to spell out. This is simply another form of inconsistency.

In Part II of the dissertation, I introduce the notion that I think should ground a theory of singular thought—that singular thought should be viewed as the answer to a question about the intentionality of thought, and show how the conception of singular thought that answers to this notion best lines up with the notion of a mental state with singular content, which is available in the literature.

There is a long-standing question in the philosophy of mind, which can be put in the following way: Our thoughts are contentful, or have intentionality. They are about the world around us. Objects in the world, and the antics of those objects, are the truth (or falsity) makers of our thoughts. But, what explains this? In virtue of what is this so? Coming to an understanding of how thoughts make contact with the world and its objects—how the world and its objects become the subject matter for thought—is one thing we aim to do as philosophers of mind.

My suggestion in Chapter 3 is that 1) singular thought can provide an answer to this question, 2) we *need* it to provide an answer to the question and, 3) if singular thought is to provide this answer, then only some ways of spelling out the epistemology of singular thought will do. My positive claims here are that there must be thoughts that are *non-satisfactional* (they pick out their objects not in virtue of the fact that those objects satisfy certain descriptive conditions, but in some other way. Non-satisfactional or singular thoughts are thoughts that are about their objects *in virtue* of the causal, practical and informational connection that the thinker bears to

those objects. It is also a thought that could not have existed as a token of the type of thought it is if not for this connection. Since singular thoughts involve this special form of relational intentionality, they are object-dependent. In Chapter 3, we also pursue an examination of the notion of object-dependence that yields some motivation to think that, in order to think a singular thought about an object, the thinker must be in a relation to the object that she is responsible for. In the end, this gives us, not only a new starting point for building an epistemology of singular thought in the absence of the influence of the tracking assumption, but also further reason to doubt some common claims about singular thought that appear in the literature (in particular, the NBT thesis).

In the final chapter of the dissertation, I further pursue the task of giving a positive account of the epistemology of singular thought by thinking more carefully about the role of descriptive knowledge in thoughts about particular objects. I do this by considering the case made by the *sortalist* about thought. The sortalist claims that it is not possible to think a singular thought about an object without classifying that object as an object of a particular kind. In this chapter, we see that, whilst the sortalist's conclusion must be false, her argument teaches something important about the nature of the ability she denies we have: the ability to think about particular objects *non-satisfactionally*.