

## Reclaiming Russellian Singular Thoughts

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There is an important cognitive difference between a thought that is directed towards a particular object and a thought that is not so directed but is instead about a certain kind of object. For example, there is a difference between my thoughts about my brother and my thoughts about brothers more generally. The former is an example of a singular thought (often called *de re* thought) while the latter exemplifies general thought. Similarly, when I come upon a particularly grizzly murder then there is an important cognitive difference between my thought that Smith's murderer is insane when I know who the murderer is and when I do not have such knowledge. In the former case my thought is about a particular person while in the latter case it is not about a particular person but rather about the murderer *whoever it might be*. Again, the former exemplifies singular thought and the latter general thought.

While there is a general agreement about there being singular thoughts and general thoughts there is little agreement on what exactly constitutes a singular thought.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, there is not much agreement on the conditions for one acquiring singular thoughts. In particular, the disagreement about the latter focuses on the one hand on the epistemic requirement of acquaintance and, on the other hand, on the metaphysical requirement of existence. Even those who insist on an acquaintance requirement for singular thoughts do not agree on the strength of the acquaintance relation.

Direct reference theorists who identify as Millians generally accept a very weak requirement when it comes to acquaintance, namely the view that one can be sufficiently acquainted with an object and so obtain a singular thought about it, in virtue of being on the receiving end of a use of a name of the object that stretches back to an initial baptism of it. I will argue that we have good

reasons to doubt that singular thought comes so cheaply. Instead, I will argue that we, including the Millians, should stay close to Bertrand Russell's 1903 view, when he held that we could be acquainted with ordinary objects. At that time Russell introduced a distinction that is sensible and important, but one that has been lost by relaxing the acquaintance constraint too much.

The paper will proceed as follows. I will first present three general constraints on singular thoughts as well as examples of prominent views that relax and/or reject some of these. The discussion will show that there are very significant disagreements about even foundational issues of singular thought. The disagreement will lead me to search for a fresh start, and to that effect I will provide an overview of Russell's 1903 view of singular thought, a view that I find sensible and valuable and a view that differs significantly from the 1912 view that he held that we can only be acquainted with sense data, universals, and oneself. The main sections of the paper will develop a Millian version of singular thought in the tradition of Russell's 1903 view. I will argue that while being on the receiving end of a causal chain linking a name to an object is sufficient to secure the reference of the name, having singular thought of the object requires acquaintance with the object and having paid conscious attention to it.

### **(Severe) Lack of Agreement on Singular Thoughts**

Sarah Sawyer has listed three constraints that guide the various views on singular thoughts:

*Content constraint:* the object is thought about directly and not descriptively.

*Metaphysical constraint:* there is an object thought about.

*Epistemic constraint:* the subject is acquainted with the object thought about. (Sawyer 2012: 270)

A quick review reveals that there is little agreement about Sawyer's constraints.

Semantic instrumentalists about singular thought maintain that it is sufficient for having a singular thought that one introduces a name and so they only accept the content constraint.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, instrumentalists maintain that we can have singular thoughts after introducing directly referring terms by means of Kaplan's "dthat," and by doing so converting an arbitrary singular term into a directly referring terms, thus enabling singular thought about the term's referent.<sup>3</sup>

Robin Jeshion rejects both the epistemic and the metaphysical constraints, as she claims that one can have singular thoughts about something that does not exist. When discussing the case where Leverrier introduces the name 'Vulcan' and then entertains a thought such as "Vulcan is a planet" she writes "Intuitively, it seems to me...plausible to hold that [the Vulcan case is an instance] in which an agent has a singular, non-descriptive belief... I wish to carve out a theory that respects these intuitions." (Jeshion 2010: 117-118)<sup>4</sup>

While Jeshion only accepts the content constraint above, she does add a condition that distinguishes her view from that of the instrumentalists. For Jeshion, one thinks a singular thought by thinking *through* or *via* a mental file that one has of the relevant object. And one only forms a mental file of an object if Jeshion's significance condition is satisfied.

*Significance condition:* a mental file is initiated on an individual only if that individual is significant to the agent with respect to her plans, projects, affective states, motivations.

(Jeshion 2010: 136; Jeshion 2014: 83)

Both Jeshion and Francois Recanati make singular thoughts dependent on mental files.<sup>5</sup> Recanati, however, denies that we can have a successful empty singular thought, while claiming that we can have the vehicle for singular thought (a mental file) in an empty case. Recanati accepts the content constraint, the metaphysical constraint, as well as a modified version of the epistemic constraint, namely

*Epistemic constraint<sub>FR</sub>*: the subject is acquainted with or correctly anticipates becoming acquainted with the object thought about.

The modified epistemic constraint allows one to be acquainted with an object by being on the receiving end of a causal chain of names that stretches back to that object. Additionally, it allows one to have singular thoughts about objects one is not acquainted with provided that one will be appropriately acquainted with them at some point. For example, when Leverrier hypothesized that Neptune exists then Recanati claims that he has a singular thought when thinking, for example, “Neptune is a planet.” The reason Recanati gives is that ‘Neptune’ is a referring name and so the resulting thought is truth-evaluative and as such qualifies as a singular thought and, furthermore, Leverrier did perceive the planet during his days.

While rejecting the epistemic requirement is the norm for semantic instrumentalists, advocates of the direct reference view have a history of accepting a very weak version of the requirement. Consider the following example. I am looking over the list of students in my class. I have not met any of the students and have never had any contact with them. As I look at the list, I think to myself, “Jessica Alba is taking my class,” ‘Jessica Alba’ being the first name on the roster. It is commonly accepted by direct reference theorists that I have a singular thought about Jessica, the reason being that the name is passed on to me via a causal chain following a baptism, and that I intend to use the name with the same reference as those I acquired it from. Nathan Salmon (Salmon 2004) points out that the *de re* connection need not be direct and intimate. Instead it may be remote and indirect, perhaps consisting of a network of causal intermediaries interposed between the cognizer and the object. Advocates of this view include Nathan Salmon, Scott Soames, and Robin Jeshion, to name a few.<sup>6</sup> The view, generally, assumes that names bring objects into thought, resulting in singular thought or *de re* thought of that object.

For direct reference theorists accepting or sincerely assenting to a sentence that expresses a singular proposition is generally deemed sufficient for having a singular thought. Accordingly, when I hear from what I take to be a reliable source that 'Thales was a philosopher, then I come to believe a singular proposition containing Thales as a constituent and so come to have a singular thought about Thales. The direct reference theorists are therefore likely to accept all three of Sawyer's constraints. The metaphysical constraint, which appears to cause problems with cases of seemingly empty names such as 'Vulcan' and 'Santa Claus', is often limited in scope by introducing literary, theoretical, and/or imaginary objects that, in some sense, exist.<sup>7</sup> We therefore have philosophers who argue that, e.g., 'Santa Claus' refers to an object,<sup>8</sup> albeit not an ordinary object, and that one can therefore have singular thoughts about Santa Claus. Singular thoughts remain object dependent on these views.

While the direct reference theorists tend to make singular thoughts object dependent, Tim Crane, Mark Sainsbury, and Jody Azzouni, in addition to Jeshion, want to allow singular thoughts about objects that do not exist. (Azzouni 2011; Crane 2013; Sainsbury 2005) It seems that any characterization one gives of singular thoughts should, at least initially, be open to the possibility of such thoughts not being object dependent. However, the main issue facing us is how to account for singular thoughts of ordinary objects.

When moving on we need an account of singular vs general thought that is useful and at the same time does not come with too much theoretical baggage. For example, it is preferable that such an account does not saddle one with a commitment to mental files and/or metaphysical presuppositions about the objects of thought. I will suggest below that we can find such an account in early Russell.

### **Russell and Singular Thoughts**

The discussion of singular thought can be traced back to Bertrand Russell. While the discussion during recent decades has been driven primarily by semantic concerns having mostly to do with direct reference, Russell's reasons for introducing singular thoughts focused more on epistemology and philosophy of mind, i.e., representation. In *Points About Denoting*, dating from 1903, Russell writes:

...if I ask: Is Smith married? And the answer is affirmative, I then know that "Smith's wife" is a denoting phrase, although I don't know who Smith's wife is. We may distinguish the terms [objects, individuals] with which we are *acquainted* from others which are merely denoted. E.g. in the above case, I am supposed to be acquainted with the term [object, individual] *Smith* and the relation *marriage*, and thence to be able to conceive a term [object, individual] having this relation to Smith, although I am not acquainted with any such term [object, individual].

...we know that every human being now living has one and only one father... This shows that to be known by description is not the same thing as to be known by acquaintance, for "the father of x" is an adequate description in the same that, as a matter of fact, there is only one person to whom it is applicable. (Russell 1994: 306)

So, one has *direct knowledge*, knowledge by acquaintance, of those objects that one is acquainted with. One can have knowledge by description of those objects with which one is not acquainted. The latter enables us to think about objects with which we are not acquainted.

It is interesting that at this time, when Russell first introduced his distinction, he uses knowledge of an individual, namely Smith, as a paradigm example of knowledge by acquaintance. Clearly, he thought that one could be acquainted with individuals, and presumably other ordinary objects, via perception. On the other hand, we can extend our knowledge beyond that with which we are acquainted via knowledge by descriptions. Descriptions are denoting phrases that denote the

objects that uniquely satisfies them and so we can have knowledge of and talk about, for example, Smith's wife, Triphena.

On Russell's view some propositions contain objects. For example, the proposition expressed by *Smith is married* contains Smith. If I am to be able to believe the proposition expressed by *Smith is married* then, somehow, I need to turn Smith into a cognitive object. Acquaintance allows for that to happen. If I am acquainted with Smith, he is a constituent of the proposition expressed when I think or say *Smith is married*. But since I am not acquainted with Triphena, she is not a constituent of the proposition expressed when I think or say *Triphena is married*. Instead, the proposition contains a denoting complex.

The introduction of sense data changed the picture outlined above, but one can view the change as resulting from tightening up the acquaintance requirement while leaving the other aspects of the picture as they were. In 1912 Russell writes:

We shall say that we have *acquaintance* with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths. Thus, in the presence of my table I am acquainted with the sense-data that make up the appearance of my table... (Russell 1961: 191)

At this point Russell would not say that I am acquainted with Smith. Instead, I am acquainted with my sense-data that make up the appearance of Smith. My knowledge of Smith is knowledge by description. He is the physical object that causes such-and-such sense-data. (Russell 1961: 192)

In 1903 Russell allows that I am acquainted with Smith. In 1912 he does not allow that and instead argues that I am only acquainted with the sense-data that make up the appearance of Smith. Acquaintance, if you will, comes on a sliding scale, and Russell has moved the scale so that we no longer can be acquainted with ordinary objects and so we cannot have singular thoughts about them. In 1912 Russell writes:

Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions. That is to say, the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description. (Russell 1961: 195)

So, proper acquaintance allows for a type of thought, and it is the type of thought that determines whether a thought is singular or not. A singular thought is not descriptive in nature.

Decades later, most direct reference theorists moved the acquaintance scale in the other direction, claiming that we can have singular thoughts about an object provided that it is at the end of a causal chain of a name that we have acquired. When doing so they gave up Russell's initial requirement that acquaintance requires, at minimum, that one perceive the relevant object. Others allow for singular thoughts of objects when we are only familiar with causal traces of it, such as a footprint, provided that some additional constraints are met. And some, the semantic instrumentalists, allow that we can introduce a name with a uniquely identifying description and thereby come to have a singular thought about the object so named. The question then remains, can such relaxed requirements result in a thought of an object that is not descriptive?

### **Minimal criteria for singular thought**

There is no uncontroversial account of singular thoughts to be found in recent literature. The direct reference theorists tend to account for singular thoughts in terms of content, where singular thoughts are mental states with singular as opposed to general content. The singular content is presented to us with singular propositions, which have objects and properties as constituents. General content, on the other hand, is presented to us with general, or descriptive propositions. Thus, the sentence

1. Obama is a former president of the United States



is understood as expressing a proposition that can be represented as an ordered couple consisting of Obama and the property of being a former president of the United States.

The direct reference account is not without problems. It allows for a very weak acquaintance relation, namely a name passed on with the intent that it continues to refer to the same object providing sufficiently strong acquaintance relation for one having singular thought. One has to wonder how such weak relation can provide one who so acquires a name with non-descriptive content instead of, e.g., metalinguistic content such as “the person I heard about from so-and-so” or “the person named so-and-so.”

I suggest that a minimal criterion be based on the general ideas captured by Russell’s initial criteria when he explained that when the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description, then the thought is not a singular thought. We can then think of a general thought about an object as one where the object is thought about in terms of being a possessor of a certain set of properties that it then satisfies. The referent of a general thought is thought about by means of descriptions. An object of singular thought, in contrast, is not thought of in such a way. In that sense singular thought is not satisfactorial.<sup>9</sup>

### **Reference and thought according to the Millian**

A Millian accepts the following: i) beliefs are binary relations, ii) names refer via causal chains, iii) simple sentences express singular propositions, iv) the name or indexical that occurs in a simple sentence contributes its referent to the proposition, and the predicate contributes the property it designates.<sup>10</sup> According to the Millian version of the direct reference theory a reference of a name is not determined by how an object fits a given set of descriptions. Instead, reference is secured via a causal chain, where one user of a name passes it on to another who then intends to use it with the

same reference. The reference of the name is therefore not satisfactorial. Because the reference of the name is not satisfactorial Millians have often been quick to conclude that the thought that results from sincerely assenting to a simple sentence that contains the name of an object, and the thought that one reports with a simple sentence containing the name, is a singular thought.

Consequently, since 'Obama' is a referring proper name, if John sincerely assents to (1) then the claim is that John has a singular thought about Obama. Similarly, were John to utter

2. I believe that Obama is a former president of the United States

then the claim is that it clearly indicates that John has a singular thought about Obama. The claim is the same if the name is of someone that John is only acquainted with via the name. If John were to sincerely assent to

3. Thales was a philosopher

then the Millians would generally take that as a clear indication that he has a singular thought about Thales. Being on the receiving end of the causal chain of a name, according to the view, is acquaintance enough for having a singular thought about the relevant object. The point is succinctly made by Marleen Rozemond in the following quote:

(Kripke) points out that many people who use the name 'Feynman' only know that Feynman is an important physicist. Yet they manage to refer to him by using the name...It seems clear...that they can have *de re* (singular) thoughts about Feynman by virtue of a causal chain going from their use of a name to a famous physicist. (Rozemond 1993: 278)

Robin Jeshion shares Rozemond's understanding. She puts the point as follows: "If you finally met me, would you thereby better understand the term 'Robin Jeshion'? Surely this is something that the Millian denies." (Jeshion 2001: 130) The point is that according to the advocates of the direct reference view there is no "additional meaning" beyond what is referred to found in

names and so there is no “additional understanding” to be had once one has acquired the name. Acquiring a name of an object enables one to have singular thoughts about it.

Rozemond and Jeshion seem to be echoing a point made earlier by Kent Bach when he argued that when a name is passed on “a speaker cannot just express but can actually *display* his *de re* way of thinking of the object and thereby enable the hearer to think of it in the same way.” (Bach 1987: 32)<sup>11</sup> However, when Bach explains what he means by someone *displaying his way of thinking* it is clear that he is assuming that the preservation of reference of a name passes on a *de re*, or a non-descriptive way of thinking as well. He writes “Since the hearer’s mental token of the name ‘inherits’ the same object as the speaker’s, the object of the hearer’s thought is determined relationally, not satisfactorily.” (Bach 1987: 32) The underlying assumption that Bach, who is not a direct reference theorist, appears to be working with is the following:

*The testimony requirement.* A sufficient condition for one having a singular, or a *de re* thought of an object is that one acquires a name of the object, the name having been initially introduced with an acquaintance relation.<sup>12</sup>

Note that the requirement is shared by the direct reference theorists, and it allows one to be on the receiving end of a long chain of use, stretching back to an initial baptism, and still have singular thought about the object named. I believe that we should not accept the requirement.

Suppose that Bach tells me about his new neighbor, Travis, and informs me that Travis is newly retired. I pick up the name and form the appropriate belief that I can express by saying that Travis is retired. According to Bach he has displayed his way of thinking about Travis to me and so I now have singular thoughts about Travis. But let us look again at Russell’s basic criteria for one having singular thought. Can I express my thoughts about Travis properly without resorting to descriptions? The answer is no. The only thoughts I have about Travis are descriptive, including thoughts such as “Bach’s new and newly retired neighbor.” Bach, having interacted with Travis,

presumably has a wealth of non-descriptive thoughts about him, but none of them are displayed to me or passed on to me with the simple passing on of a name.

Both Keith Donnellan and David Kaplan agree that singular (de re) thought does not come as easy as Rozemond, Jeshion, and Bach assume. In “The Contingent *A Priori* and Rigid Designators,” Donnellan presents a skeptical view of anyone being able to acquire a priori de re (singular) knowledge with stipulative descriptive reference fixing. (Donnellan 1981) The proposition that Donnellan is primarily concerned with is expressed by the following sentence, presumably uttered by Leverrier when fixing the reference of ‘Neptune’:

If the planet that caused such and such discrepancies in the orbit of Uranus exists, then  
Neptune is the planet which caused such and such discrepancies in the orbit of Uranus.

Towards the end of the paper Donnellan characterizes the requirement for de re (singular) knowledge by adopting Kaplan’s view that one must be *en rapport* with the object. He then emphasizes that one is not *en rapport* with an object if one has to resort to using stipulative reference fixing. The argument can be presented as follows:

1. In order to have de re (singular) knowledge of an object, one must be *en rapport* with it.
2. When having to use stipulative descriptive reference fixing, one is not *en rapport* with the object being named.
3. So, stipulative descriptive reference fixing does not provide one with de re (singular) knowledge.

Of course, the notion of *en rapport* is not spelled out, but the lesson learned from the argument is still rather clear. It is precisely when one does not have direct contact with objects, when one does not perceive the object being named, as Leverrier with regard to Neptune, that one resorts to stipulative descriptive reference fixing. And that seems to be the core of Donnellan’s rejection of stipulative descriptive reference fixing enabling one to acquire de re (singular) beliefs about the object named. Because the stipulator is not in the right relationship with the object being named, she cannot

acquire de re (singular) knowledge about the object. Instead, the resulting knowledge is de dicto, or descriptive.

In “Afterthoughts,” David Kaplan states that a name does not put us *en rapport* with an object and so does not provide one with de re (singular) beliefs about it.

On my view, acquisition of a name does not, in general, put us *en rapport* (in the language of “Quantifying In”) with the referent. But this is not required for us to use the name in the standard way as a device of direct reference. Nor is it required for us to apprehend, to believe, to doubt, to assert, or to hold other *de dicto* attitudes toward the proposition we express using the name (Kaplan 1989a: 605)

So, acquiring a name is not sufficient for one to have a singular or a de re thought about the object named. A stronger connection is required.

Gareth Evans provides an example that clearly questions Bach’s account of displaying or inheriting a way of thinking via the use of names as well as Jeshion’s claim about understanding names. Suppose that person X joins a group that is talking about a certain Louis. X listens in for a while and then joins in the conversation with appropriate uses of the name ‘Louis’. It certainly seems that he is, when doing so, successful in referring to the same Louis that his friends are talking about. The discussion is about King Louis XIII. If that is so then Jeshion, as well as most Millians, are committed to attributing to X singular thoughts about Louis XIII. Suppose now that due to some massive errors X comes away from the discussion believing that Louis is a basketball player, Evans comments on this:

[N]otice how little *point* there is in saying that he (entertains a singular thought about) one French king rather than another, or any other person named by the name. There is now nothing the speaker is prepared to say or do which relates him differentially to the one King. This is why it is so outrageous to say that he believes that Louis XIII is a basketball player.

The notion of (singular thought) has simply been severed from all the connections that made it of interest. (Evans 1973: 274)

It appears to me that Evans is pulling on the right intuitions here. Even though the subject in the story comes away using the name 'Louis', and even though the subject can use that name to refer to Louis, he did not come away with singular thoughts about Louis. Even though the name is passed on, singular thought is not. This is very much in line with Donnellan and Kaplan. As Kaplan might point out, X has acquired a name that he can use as a referring device, but that does not enable X to have singular (de re) thoughts about the object named. And Donnellan might point out that the discussion can only provide X with content akin to one acquired from descriptive reference fixing; Louis is whoever my friends are talking about. And that is not sufficient for singular (de re) thought.

We now have on the one hand the direct reference view that requires a very weak acquaintance relation for singular thoughts, namely one that can be satisfied by the proper acquisition of a name, and on the other hand we have Donnellan, Kaplan, Evans' example and the example of Bach's new neighbor, all of which suggest that the direct reference view is too permissive. Most Millians, as well as Bach, accept The Testimony Requirement while Evans and Kaplan clearly reject it. The Millians offer as a support for their view the direct reference claim that all there is to the meaning of a name is its referent, while Donnellan, Kaplan, Evans' example and the example of Bach's new neighbor provide support for one acquiring a name not being sufficient for having a singular thought about the object named. There is a way to explain the intuitions that drive Donnellan's example, Kaplan's view, Evans' example and the example of Bach's neighbor while accommodating the main tenets of the direct reference view and Millianism, but The Testimony Requirement falls by the wayside as a result.

Jeshion claimed that a Millian should maintain that he doesn't understand her name any better after meeting her than he did before doing so. That is right when we are talking about the

typical Millian who accepts a very weak acquaintance requirement. But the typical Millian, I believe, is not right. Someone who has never met Jeshion should argue that he does understand the name 'Robin Jeshion' better after meeting her than he did before doing so. Before meeting her he had a *general understanding* of the name, that is, he knew the semantic role the name plays as a proper name which suffices to enable him to use the name competently as a referring device. This agrees with Kaplan's view that one can acquire a name and use it in a standard way as a device of reference without being able to have de re (singular) thoughts about the object named. But since he did not know who the referent was, he did not have a *specific understanding* of the name, that is, he did not know that it was *this very individual* who was the semantic value of the name. Since he has specific understanding *and* general understanding of the name 'Robin Jeshion' after meeting her, he now has a better understanding of it than he did before meeting her.

Nathan Salmon makes a similar point in a footnote. He writes:

There may be a weaker sense of 'understand' in which the reference-fixer 'understands' the word 'metre' simply by knowing that it was introduced in such a way that 'one metre' refers to whatever length  $S$  has at  $t_0$ , if  $S$  exists. But understanding 'metre' in this weak sense does not give one the basic semantic knowledge that 'one metre' refers, if  $S$  exists, specifically to one metre. (Salmon 1987: 200, n.210)

Salmon thus allows that one can use a name as a semantic device without having full semantic knowledge of its reference. But while Salmon discusses the possibility of weak and strong understanding in connection with naming, I intend, capturing Kaplan's observation above, specific and general understanding to apply to established names.

When a name is passed on without the hearer being otherwise acquainted with the named object then the hearer can only have a *general understanding* of the name. While having general understanding is sufficient to successfully use the name in a public language it does not provide one

with singular thoughts. It is not until one is in a position to have *specific understanding* of the name of the object it refers to, i.e., in a position to have thoughts that are not descriptive in nature, that one can acquire singular thoughts. The understanding that makes singular thoughts interesting and relevant is to be found in the specific understanding of names; the knowledge that the name is of *this very individual*. This is the insight that is reflected in Russell's 1903 account of singular thought.

When I have a general understanding of a name, then I can use it competently and appropriately to refer to its bearer. I then typically have some descriptive beliefs about the object named filed away. The descriptions might not reveal much about the object. Instead, they might be very general in nature, such as descriptions to the effect that I acquired the name in a recent conversation with my friends and, as in the case of Evans' X, many of the beliefs might be false. However, the competent use of a name does not entail that one has a non-satisfactorial representation of the bearer of the name in any interesting way. Such representation typically requires one perceiving or having perceived the object. And while a proper name refers to its bearer in a non-satisfactorial way, a speaker does not display (in the sense of showing or passing on non-satisfactorial ways of thinking about an object) how she represents an object when using that name. A simple example should suffice. When I utter "Arya is fast," speaking to a person who is hearing the name 'Arya' for the first time and who knows nothing about Arya, then I have not displayed or shown or indicated how I think about Arya, and I have not displayed whether I am acquainted with Arya. When uttering the sentence, I have not even indicated to my listener that Arya is a dog. And were I to indicate that she is a dog, uttering for example "Arya is fast for a dog," then I have not displayed or revealed when saying so what kind of a dog she is, nor have I indicated what she is fast at doing. In fact, my use of a proper name when passing it on to a new user generally does not display or indicate or show how I think about its bearer. Here the predicates and context are more helpful for a listener. Even so, the resulting thought will not be a non-satisfactorial thought about



Arya. Instead, the listener will have descriptive thoughts about her, such as “the dog I talked about with so-and-so,” or “the fast dog,” or “the dog named Arya.”<sup>13</sup>

The Testimony Requirement assumes that it is sufficient for one to have a general understanding of a name in order to have a singular thought about the object named. But the distinction between general and specific understanding of names explains the appeal of Evans’ example as well as the example of Bach’s neighbor. While the subjects in the examples have general understanding of the names ‘Louis’ and ‘Travis’, they do not have specific understanding of the names. Having general understanding of a name is not sufficient for one having singular thought about the object named as such understanding only provides general thoughts. While the causal connection between an object named and the use of the relevant name secures non-satisfactional reference, it does not provide the information needed for one to have non-satisfactional thoughts, singular thoughts, of the object named. Something more is required for that.

Several philosophers have suggested that causal connections other than the one required by testimony are sufficient for one having singular thoughts about objects. For example, Jeshion and Recanati allow that Leverrier had singular thoughts about Neptune without ever perceiving the planet. It suffices, on their account, that he has seen the appropriate causal traces of Neptune, namely the perturbations in the orbit of nearby known planets and that, of course, he satisfies Jeshion’s significance condition and Recanati’s requirement that he later become more directly acquainted with it. Similarly, one can, as Jeshion suggests, have a singular thought about a nearby bear even though one has only encountered the bear’s scat. Upon seeing the fresh scat, one might think “he is close to us,” thus entertaining a singular thought about the bear.

Relying on causal connections of the kind described above is not likely to be helpful in clarifying the nature of singular thought, as these connections are too permissive. I am causally connected to the person who finalized the online purchase of the endnote program that I am

currently using, I am causally connected with the person who drove my car off the assembly lot wherever it was assembled, I am causally connected with the person I never see who assembled my hamburger at a drive-through, and I am causally connected with the person who made the final inspection of the shirt that I am wearing. Such connections do not enable me to have singular thoughts about the relevant people, regardless of how much I otherwise care about them and regardless of whether I at some point in the future I will meet these people.<sup>14</sup>

### **Strong acquaintance and conscious attention**

Testimony and causal connections are too weak to provide one with singular thoughts. While passing on a name secures reference and provides a general understanding of a name, it does not provide a non-descriptive representation of the object named.

Someone might suggest at this point that we might resort to referential use of descriptions and when doing so allow singular thoughts to be descriptive. The idea would then be that I can employ the distinction between referential and attributive uses of descriptions to appropriately connect with the object of thought. For example, while it appears that I cannot have a singular thought about the person who assembled my burger, I might use the description “the person who assembled this burger” referentially to pick out that very person. But this approach will not work. When Keith Donnellan introduced the referential/attribution distinction then one of the important differences between the examples of the two uses was that one could identify the referent when one used a description referentially as *this very person/object*. In the case of attributive uses, on the other hand, the referent could not be so identified. Instead, one referred to the object or person who fit the description *whatever or whoever it is*.<sup>15</sup> My use of the description “the person who assembled this burger,” in this light, has to be attributive. It is no different from my use of “the person who drove

my car off the assembly lot” in the regard that I cannot identify the person beyond that. It is the person who fits the description, *whoever it is*.

In the non-controversial cases of singular thoughts of ordinary objects, the one having the thought has perceived the object the thought is of. It is not controversial that I have singular thoughts about my spouse, my parents who raised me, my children whom I helped raise, and the soccer ball that I regularly try to juggle with less than stellar results. In each of these cases I am directly acquainted with the relevant objects. That is, I have perceived them. But the non-controversial examples are also examples of objects that I have paid conscious attention to, that is, the kind of attention that allows me to indicate that it is directed at *this very object*, and the examples thus satisfy what I think is a second necessary condition for one having singular thoughts of ordinary objects. The examples below show why perceiving an object and paying attention to it is not sufficient for one having singular thoughts about it and why *conscious attention* is needed as well.

Consider first an example that most have encountered in some form, where I drive or walk some distance towards my destination. Once I safely arrive at my destination, I realize that I cannot recall what I encountered on my way there. Clearly, I was paying some kind of attention to my environment and there is a clear sense in which I perceived various obstacles as I managed not to run into them as I navigated towards my destination. But this kind of a focused attention is not the kind of attention that allows one to acquire singular thoughts about various objects that one encounters.<sup>16</sup> While I clearly perceived various objects on my way and paid enough attention to them not to run into them or stumble over them, I cannot recall any of them once I reach my destination. I have no current representation of these objects and no beliefs about them.<sup>17</sup>

Or consider an example of a face in the crowd. When I encounter a crowd of people, I might scan the crowd and take in its size and diversity. When doing so I might not pay attention to any particular individual. While I might have singular thoughts about the crowd at this point, I do

not have singular thoughts about any of its members. That changes when I, for some reason, focus on one particular face in the crowd. At that point I am paying conscious attention to that very person and so I am able to have singular thoughts about that person. When paying such attention to the face in the crowd I satisfy how Montemayor and Haladjian characterize conscious attention; namely as one that “requires a demonstrative awareness of attending to a specific object (e.g., ‘that’ or ‘this’ object). Such attention also entails voluntarily maintaining attention to an external object that has been perceptually selected.” (Montemayor and Haladjian 2015: 229) On their account conscious attention must include contents that are available for thought and report. (2015: 143) The kind of attention that I paid to my environment when driving to my destination did not provide me with content that was available for thought and report and so I was not paying conscious attention to my environment at the time. While scanning the crowd does provide me with content that is available for thought and report, it is only when I focus my attention on a specific person that I can attend to *that* person specifically. Conscious attention paid to that person enables me to have singular thoughts, non-satisfactional thoughts, about the person.

Consider again the example of Arya. Can I perhaps show you a picture of Arya and in doing so enable you to have a singular thought about her? While Russell did not discuss that possibility, perhaps we should accept *some* intermediaries as sufficient for one acquiring a non-satisfactional representation that we can say is of *this very object*. While I have never met Obama, I have seen photographs of him as well as TV footages and interviews that feature him prominently. Given the faithful representation that the technology gives us, it is clearly capable of providing us with non-descriptive representations. It is not unreasonable to accept that such viewing counts as perceiving Obama and thus resulting in singular thoughts about him.<sup>18</sup>

If perceiving an object and paying conscious attention to it is required for singular thought, then that entails that me seeing bear scat does not enable me to have singular thoughts about the

bear who left it there. While I have perceived the scat, I have not perceived the bear and not paid conscious attention to the bear itself. All I have experienced are some causal traces left by the bear. Until I perceive the bear my thoughts of it are general (e.g., “the bear that left the scat”), not singular, and my attempted references to it are attributive in nature. I refer to the bear that left the scat, whatever bear that is.

Those who have claimed that one can have singular thoughts about an object by being on the receiving end of a causal chain of names advocate a view that admits of very weak causal traces being sufficient to acquire singular thoughts. But, as we have seen, the main reason given for accepting that view is that *reference* is secured via the causal chain. As I have argued we can accommodate that view by acknowledging that one can acquire a *general understanding* of the relevant name that way, but not *specific understanding*. General understanding gives us general thoughts. More is needed for one to acquire singular thought.<sup>19</sup>

### **Taking Stock**

Someone might object at this point that I have restricted singular thoughts too much; that it is too hard to acquire singular thoughts. And it is true that the view presented here is more restrictive than those of Jeshion, who gives up the acquaintance and the metaphysical constraints,<sup>20</sup> Crane, who accepts Jeshion’s intuitions regarding acquaintance, (Crane 2013: 152) and Recanati, who advocates very weak epistemic relations, to name a few. But the view I have presented restricts the scope of singular thoughts in a very similar way to Russell’s 1903 view. That is, singular thoughts are non-descriptive thoughts, one can have singular thoughts of ordinary objects, and one needs to be acquainted with (having perceived) such objects in order to have singular thoughts about them. Any other relationship results in descriptive thoughts. Can one be acquainted with an object without perceiving it directly? Perhaps, yes, provided that one’s experience of the object is of the kind that

enables one to form a non-descriptive thought of the object. This might allow for one being acquainted with an object after seeing it on TV, for example.

Finally, the view presented here has consequences for one believing singular propositions. Singular propositions contain the object referred to. However, the view I have advocated entails that quite frequently we don't grasp a non-descriptive mode of presentation of the relevant object. Instead, we likely replace the name with a description, thus coming to believe a general proposition. If, after meeting Smith, someone tells me that he is married to Triphena then, as Russell observed in 1903, my thought that Triphena is not present is a general thought more appropriately expressed as "Smith's wife is not present."

### **Concluding remarks**

After showing that there is no agreement about the nature of singular thought, I revisited early Russell to find greater clarity. I then advanced an account in the spirit of early Russell. I have argued that the advocates of the direct reference view who argue that being on the receiving end of a name is sufficient for having singular thoughts about the object named have not provided good reasons for their view. Passing on a name can provide the recipient with a general understanding of the name, but not specific understanding. That is, when acquiring the name, the recipient may not learn the identity of the object named as *this very object*. For that we need strong acquaintance. While names do play an important role in communication when passing on information the explanation is not, as Bach would have it, that the name displays how the object is thought about.

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<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, Hawthorne and Manley (2012) have used the lack of agreement on what constitutes singular thought to argue that there are no such thoughts.

<sup>2</sup> Both Kaplan and Harman have advocated instrumentalism. (Harman 1977; Kaplan 1989b)

<sup>3</sup> For any definite description  $f$ ,  $d_{that}(f)$  refers directly to the object that satisfies the description. Accordingly,  $d_{that}(\text{the largest whale in the ocean})$  refers directly to the largest whale in the ocean. See, for example, Kaplan (1989b)

<sup>4</sup> I discuss Jeshion's view in Geirsson (2018)

<sup>5</sup> See for example Recanati (2012; 2021)

<sup>6</sup> See for example Salmon (1986), Jeshion (2002), Soames (1995)

<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, most of the advocates of this approach accept some, but not all of literary, mythical, or fictional objects, thus still leaving a problem of empty names. See for example Salmon (1998, 2002). Also Braun (2005). Even Braun, who is existentially most generous of the above, claims that there are still some empty names. See Braun (2021)

<sup>8</sup> A clear example here is Azzouni (2021)

<sup>9</sup> Goodman (2018) provides a similar account.

<sup>10</sup> The Millian also accepts semantic innocence, namely that a simple sentence expresses the same content when embedded in belief context.

<sup>11</sup> Bach (2010) emphasizes his relaxed conditions for singular thoughts. There he writes "...even hearing about or reading about [an] individual from someone else who has perceived that individual or who at least has heard or read about that individual from someone who has heard or read about that individual...from someone who has perceived that individual." (2010: 57-58)

<sup>12</sup> Granted, Jeshion would not agree with the sufficiency claim, as she would insist on at least the significance condition being satisfied as well.

<sup>13</sup> It is fairly evident that acquiring names is not a necessary condition for singular thoughts as one can have singular thoughts about something without having a name for that object. I can, for example, have singular thoughts about a soccer ball that I am trying to juggle without me having a name for the ball and even without formulating any thoughts that explicitly use names or indexicals to refer to it.

<sup>14</sup> Similar points have been made by Jody Azzouni (2011) and Filepe Martone (2016).

<sup>15</sup> See Donnellan (1966). Anne Bezuidenhout (2021) argues that the referential/attributional distinction is in fact an epistemic distinction with different uses representing differences in the epistemic access to the entity denoted by the description.

<sup>16</sup> For more on the various kinds of attention see Montemayor and Haladjian (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Someone might suggest here that Pylyshin's fingers of instantiation, FINSTs, provide unconscious content to mental files. However, FINSTs lock onto objects and so allow us to track them in a way that is independent of our representation of the objects. FINSTs provide links to object files without endowing them with content and so without providing any representation of the object being tracked, nonconceptual (in a philosophically relevant way) or otherwise. What FINSTs do is open up information channels; they provide access to information. They do not provide information in the sense of providing representations of what is being tracked. Instead, they make it possible to receive information as representations. See Pylyshyn (2004, 2007). For a detailed discussion of FINSTs relevance, or lack thereof, to mental files as philosophers use that concept, see Geirsson (2018).

<sup>18</sup> That is not to say that all representations can provide non-descriptive representations. Clearly, some of the representative works of Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee, to name two examples, are too abstract or too stylistic to provide an accurate representation of a subject that it is of. When one views some of their portraits, it is not likely that one can recognize them as portraying one particular person rather than another.

<sup>19</sup> Some might wonder how statements containing different but codesignative names can resist substitution on the account that I am providing. I discuss that in Geirsson (2013, 2021)

<sup>20</sup> See for example her Dessert Sensations example, where her father thinks singular thoughts about a cake-delivering business yet to exist. (Jeshion 2010: 117-118)