

## Names and Singular Thought

### **1: Names, Singular Thought and Name-Based Singular Thought**

Influential work on proper names, most centrally associated with Kripke (1980), has had a significant influence in the literature on *singular* (or ‘de re’) *thought*. To many, work on names has seemed to entail, contra early theorists of singular thought like Russell (1910), that there are indeed singular thoughts about ordinary external objects like tables and chairs. It has also seemed to entail that the *range* of singular thoughts about ordinary external objects is *much broader* than many post-Russellian theorists assumed it to be. For example, many of those theorists thought there were singular thoughts about external objects, but only those about which the thinker had discriminating knowledge, or towards which she bore some relatively demanding epistemic relation.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, a dominant position among contemporary theorists of singular thought, whose views diverge in other respects, is that we are able to think singular thoughts about any object we can refer to by name.

Firstly, if we assume (as I will for current purposes) that having a *singular thought that is about an object o* requires entertaining a singular content that contains *o*,<sup>2</sup> we can see how Kripke’s view of names would seem to displace Russell’s view that we cannot have singular thoughts about ordinary external objects.<sup>3</sup> Kripke is meant to have taught us that the content of a sentence containing an ordinary proper name is a singular proposition containing the referent of the name.<sup>4</sup> So, it *seems* that, when I sincerely assert a belief about my mother with the sentence, ‘Luciana Goodman is Italian’, my belief has a singular proposition containing Luciana, as its content. Secondly, it seems we can refer by name to many objects besides the ones we know well (like our mothers!) or even know at all. This includes very distant (in space or time) objects of testimony, and even objects with which we may *lack* a testimonial connection at all (but for which we have *coined* a name).<sup>5</sup> This fact about the *range* of name-use has shaped the singular thought literature over the last several decades: the idea that any ‘acquaintance’ constraint on singular thought must be very permissive is now truly dominant;<sup>6</sup> the view that there is *no* acquaintance requirement on singular thought is now fairly popular.<sup>7</sup>

Broadly, though, we can ask whether the facts about the semantics of names in fact entail much at all about the conditions under which we can have singular thoughts about external objects. This chapter can be viewed as an opinionated overview focused on this question. It outlines the reasoning and

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<sup>1</sup> See Strawson (1959) and Evans (1982)

<sup>2</sup> This could be a requirement on having a singular thought *that is about an object o* even if there are cases of singular thoughts that are not mental states with singular content, because there could be a class of thoughts that are singular, despite not being about an object *o*. For example, see Azzouni’s contribution to this volume for discussion of putative cases of singular thoughts that lack singular content. The possibility of empty singular thoughts does not make a difference to the points made in this contribution concerning the relationship between proper names and singular thoughts.

<sup>3</sup> For Russell, this view seems to go hand in hand with the view that ordinary names are disguised descriptions (but Russell (1910) contains some conflicting passages).

<sup>4</sup> I’m leaving predicative uses of names (as in, ‘most Lucianas are Italian’) aside for current purposes.

<sup>5</sup> There is a question to be asked about the conditions under which it’s possible to (successfully) coin a name for an object one knows only by description, but I’ll leave this issue aside. See Kaplan (1989a, 1989b), Strawson (1974), Jeshion (2009) for discussion.

<sup>6</sup> See Jeshion’s (2010), ‘Standard Standard on Acquaintance’.

<sup>7</sup> Jeshion (2002), Hawthorne and Manley (2012), Borg (2007).

presumptions of theorists who do think important entailments of this kind exist. It also aims to illustrate a certain set of reasons to resist this idea. The piece is distinctive in approaching these questions by focusing on the *function* of names and what this function entails (or doesn't) about the kinds of thoughts (singular or descriptive) we have when we use names to communicate.

## 2: The Name-based Singular Thought Thesis

The influence of the Kripkean account of names on views about singular thought is most clearly evident in the widespread acceptance of a view, which I have called the *name-based singular thought thesis* (NBT). NBT holds that taking part in communication involving a proper name entails the ability to entertain singular thoughts about the name's referent.<sup>8</sup>

The thinking behind NBT is natural enough, but worth being clear about. If proper names are Millian (if their semantic contribution in context to the content of a sentence containing them is their bearer rather than a description of their bearer), then utterances of sentences containing names semantically express singular contents.<sup>9</sup> This seems to mean that understanding an utterance of a sentence containing a name involves having a singular thought (on the assumption that having a singular thought is entertaining a singular content). On the assumption that communication involves understanding, this generates NBT.

A very common *extension* of NBT is the claim that name-use can *enable* one to think otherwise unavailable singular thoughts about the name's referent. This view—call it *extended-NBT*—is generated via the assumption that there are cases where we successfully communicate with utterances of sentences containing names even though we have no *antecedent* ability to think a singular thought about the referent of the name (for example, cases in which one receives testimony that employs a name, about a thing or person one hasn't encountered and doesn't already know about). It's worth noting the difference between simple NBT and *extended-NBT* because theorists are not always clear about their relation to *extended-NBT*, and some proponents of NBT, who are motivated by the range of name-use to extend or reject the acquaintance constraint on singular thought, claim not to think that communication with a public name is itself what explains the ability to think singular thoughts about the name's referent.<sup>10</sup>

Before saying anything about the plausibility of NBT and its extension, it's worth briefly documenting the fact that influential thinkers, whose views about singular thought otherwise differ, have held these views to be true.

In the context of defending a view on which linguistic competence can precede and explain semantic knowledge, Soames (1989) focuses on name-use and claims that one can acquire the ability to think

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<sup>8</sup> See Goodman (2018), Though note the difference in formulation.

<sup>9</sup> Note, though, that even *predicativists* about names (who think names have metalinguistic descriptive meaning) tend to think that the semantic content expressed *in context* by referential uses of names is singular, so their view might also seem to entail NBT.

<sup>10</sup> A good example is Jeshion (2010) who holds that the *significance* of an object known by description explains both the generation of singular thoughts about it *and* the ability to successfully introduce a (linguistic) name for it. She thinks generation of a mental name explains introduction of a public name, not vice versa (Jeshion, 2010, Section 4). Insofar as Jeshion is right that Kaplan also holds mental name production to be prior to public name production, Kaplan's 'instrumentalism' would fall in a similar category (but see the quotation from Kaplan below). See Section 5 for a way of thinking about the connection between this view and extended-NBT.

singular thoughts about Pluto on the basis of exposure to the name ‘Pluto’:

‘In short, the explanation of my belief that Pluto is a distant planet involves the fact that, (i) I accept the sentence ‘Pluto is a distant planet’; (ii) the sentence expresses the proposition that Pluto is a distant planet; and (iii) I am a competent speaker, and thereby understand the sentence. Moreover, my understanding of the sentence is not a matter of using it to express descriptive propositions that I might have come to believe on independent grounds’<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Salmon (2004), makes the following claim about the case in which one ‘encounters someone’s name for the first time without being adequately introduced... say by looking at a new class enrollment list or a luggage identification tag’:

‘If one then uses the name to state something about the person so named, while still having no idea whose name it is, one makes a *de re* assertion and expresses a *de re* belief. (‘This belongs to one Byron Mallone. Mr Mallone, whoever he is, has traveled to Israel and was very recently around someone who smokes cigars.’)<sup>12</sup>

NBT proponents vary in whether they emphasise cases in which name-use comes at the end of a causal, testimonial chain leading back to the name’s referent, cases in which names are brought into the language through descriptive reference-fixing, or both.<sup>13</sup> For example, Kaplan (1989) famously held a version of NBT that extends to names whose referents are established by acts of descriptive reference-fixing:

‘The introduction of a new proper name by means of dubbing in terms of description and the active contemplation of characters involving dthat-terms—two mechanisms for providing direct reference to the denotation of an arbitrary definite description—constitute a form of cognitive restructuring; they broaden our range of thought’<sup>14</sup>

On Kaplan’s view, the sense in which thought is ‘broadened’ is that one is enabled to ‘apprehend singular propositions’ containing objects previously known only by description.<sup>15</sup>

Bach, who holds a *nominal description theory* of names (on which the meaning of a name is a metalinguistic description) nonetheless also endorses NBT. He claims that name-based singular thoughts are a species of communication-based singular thoughts, thus emphasizing cases where names come with a causal, representational connections to their referents. He claims that names are ‘made to order’ for the role of ‘enabling others to have *de re* thoughts about unfamiliar things’<sup>16</sup> Hearing an unfamiliar proper name puts one in a position to think singular thoughts about its referent:

‘Now if the speaker is thinking of something by name, he is entertaining a mental token of that name; and the audience, upon hearing that token, forms a mental token of the same name, which he then retains in memory. Since the hearer’s mental token of the name ‘inherits’ the

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<sup>11</sup> Soames (1989, 588).

<sup>12</sup> Salmon (2004)

<sup>13</sup> See Goodman (2018) for further elaboration.

<sup>14</sup> Kaplan (1989b)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Bach (1987, 33). Here, we have a clear commitment to extended-NBT, although some of the above theorists arguably hold it too.

same objects as the speaker's, the object of the hearer's thought is determined relationally, not satisfactorily.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, resistance to NBT is very rare among singularists.<sup>18</sup> However Evans (1982, 74) arguably rejects NBT. In discussing name-use that comes at the end of a causal, testimonial chain leading back to the referent, he claims that cases in which one uses a name but lacks discriminating knowledge of its reference are 'straightforward instances, in the field of singular reference, of the gap that opens up between what a speaker says and what thoughts he may have in his mind'. In discussing names introduced by acts of descriptive reference-fixing, he follows Grice (1969, 140) in claiming that we cannot produce new thoughts simply by the 'stroke of a pen'.<sup>19</sup>

### 3: Assumptions Behind NBT

As I've stressed in previous work (Goodman, 2018), although the thinking behind NBT and its extension seem compelling, it is important and under-appreciated that both claims are far from obligatory. They are based on optional assumptions.<sup>20</sup>

The first assumption, required to generate the claim that understanding an utterance of a sentence containing a (non-empty) name involves having a singular thought, is that understanding an utterance made with a sentence, *s*, requires grasping the semantic content expressed by *s*. I call this *semantic content accessibility*.<sup>21</sup> This assumption is admittedly intuitive. A function of language is to express our thoughts, so it seems natural that a successful linguistic exchange—which I will take to require understanding—involves the speaker using a sentence whose semantic content in context *is* the content of the thought she intends to convey, and a hearer grasping that content.<sup>22</sup>

From another perspective, though, it would be unsurprising if semantic content accessibility had exceptions. Languages are social tools, or social artifacts. Their features—including the semantic contents of their sentences in context—are not determined by any particular user's relation to them, but by complex facts about the way they function in contexts of that kind for a community of users. Given this, it would hardly be surprising if different individuals could (successfully) use the social tool by bearing a range of different relations to it. Perhaps speakers and hearers can make successful use of a sentence—can communicate using it—by grasping slightly different information. If we think there is such a thing as *the* semantic content of a sentence in context, and that this content is determined by facts about its function for the community of speakers, then it seems unsurprising that successful use of the sentence to communicate might involve grasp by language users of some content that is

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<sup>17</sup> Bach (1987, 32). Bach is unusual in that he tries to give a story about *how* name use enables singular thought. See also Jeshion (2002), who emphasizes the need to do this.

<sup>18</sup> Goodman (2018) explicitly rejects it, as does Geirsson (2013, 2018). See also Sullivan (2010) for problematization of NBT. Raven (2008) claims there are challenges to the related idea of testimonial acquaintance, but presupposes that such acquaintance must be possible and thereby, I suspect, endorses NBT.

<sup>19</sup> Evans (1982, 50). Those who hold NBT but not its extension may dispute Evans's claims about cases, but may claim to agree that new thoughts are *not* produced merely 'by the stroke of a pen' (Jeshion, 2002, 63).

<sup>20</sup> See Goodman (2018) for further discussion of both.

<sup>21</sup> This principle is related to several that are widely held. The most famous is Kripke's (1979) *Disquotation Principle* (p. 248): 'If an individual *i* who understands a sentence *S* sincerely asserts *S*, then *i* believes (and therefore grasps) the proposition expressed by *S*'. Others are Jeshion's (2001) *Accessibility of Content*, Hawthorne and Manley's (2012) *Anti-Latitude* and Recanati's (1993) *Congruence Principle*. See also Jeshion (2010, 111-12).

<sup>22</sup> I'm talking here about the *Russellian* content of thoughts, and leaving aside whatever further fineness of grain one may think is part of our best account of thought content.

different to the semantic content (but related to it in some systematic way, the story about which we need to tell).

The second assumption frequently made by NBT proponents is crucial for *extended-NBT*—that is, for the conclusion that name-use *enables* (previously unavailable) singular thoughts. This assumption is that there are cases where we successfully communicate with utterances of sentences containing names even though we have no antecedent ability to think a singular thought about the referent of the name. I call these uses *pure testimony cases*. The assumption is that there are pure testimony uses in which communication succeeds.

In a *pure testimony* use of a name, the hearer lacks any independent means of having a singular thought about the name's referent, which could be brought to bear in forming a singular thought about the referent of the name. For example, if you have an acquaintance I have never met or heard of before, and about whom I know nothing, and you communicate about her by uttering (1),

(1) Manuela DeNicola is from Rome

this is a pure testimony case. If, however, I have some memory-based singular thoughts about Manuela, based originally on perceptual demonstrative thoughts I have had about her, and you tell me,

(2) Manuela De Nicola, the Italian girl you met last Tuesday, is from Rome

this will not be a pure testimony case, since I can bring to bear my independent ability to think singular thoughts about Manuela, to form a singular thought about Manuela DeNicola *as such*.<sup>23</sup>

If hearers in *pure testimony cases* grasp the singular content semantically expressed, then it seems that hearing the name *enabled* them to have otherwise unavailable singular thoughts. *Extended NBT* therefore relies on the claim that communication can be successful in pure testimony cases, because these are the cases that isolate the effect of *name-use* on a thinker's ability to think singular thoughts about the referent of the name.<sup>24</sup>

If both the assumption about *pure testimony cases* and *semantic content accessibility* hold, extended-NBT follows.<sup>25</sup>

In previous work (Goodman, 2018), I allowed that there are cases of successful communication involving pure testimony uses of names, and resisted both NBT theses by arguing for an expanded

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<sup>23</sup> Cases in which testimony causes one to think a singular thought about an object, but in which one uses independent resources to form that thought are also not pure testimony cases in the relevant sense. E.g., in a case in which you use a demonstrative utterance to draw my attention to an object *o* in my visual field which I have not previously thought about ('look at that!, pointing at *o*), I previously had no singular thoughts about *o* but they were nonetheless there for the taking. Your utterance caused me to have a singular thought about *o* but does not explain my ability to have singular thoughts about *o*. Intuitively, the fact that I perceive *o* is what explains that.

<sup>24</sup> I'm aware I've spotted myself the assumption that *successful communication* requires *understanding*. I'll assume that a view that doubted this could just as well be stated as a view that doubted semantic content accessibility.

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, some thinkers (Jeshion, e.g.) who claim that (linguistic) name-use itself does not enable singular thought do not deny that there are pure testimony cases where hearers grasp the singular content expressed. This suggests they do not simply *reject* extended-NBT, but rather adopt a nuanced version of it. See Section 5 and 6 for elaboration.

conception of *understanding*, which involves rejecting *semantic content accessibility*. I tried to illustrate how successful communication with a name could take place (in pure testimony cases) without the hearer grasping a singular content containing the referent: it could take place in virtue of the hearer grasping a meta-linguistic or meta-communicative descriptive content that is *pragmatically conveyed* by the utterance.<sup>26</sup> I claimed that a picture of communication rejecting semantic content accessibility in fact better reflects the two-tiered structure of name-using practices than one on which grasping the semantic content of a sentence containing a name is required for understanding.<sup>27</sup> The suggestions outlined here are consistent with that picture and in fact intended to flesh it out from another angle.

It is worth reflecting on the fact that intuitions about the success of communication in pure testimony cases are, at best, shaky. We can take this observation as a starting point and, by thinking about the *functional role* of names, ask why, or in what sense, pure testimony cases seem *deficient*. This discussion will suggest that the functional role of names *does* motivate the claim that the semantic content expressed by a sentence containing a name is a singular proposition containing the name's referent, but *does not* motivate the idea that the thoughts of speakers in such contexts are singular thoughts about the name's referent. In this way, thinking, first, about the felicity of pure testimony cases in relation to the functional role of names, and next, about the functional role of names more generally, sheds light on NBT, *extended-NBT* and *semantic content accessibility* from a new direction. The discussion is meant as an overview and starting point. It will not constitute a full argument against NBT or *extended-NBT*, but rather an illustration of an outlook that rejects both NBT theses (Sections 4 & 7). It will also provide an illustration of one way to go about defending them (Section 5), as well as a discussion of the challenges facing it (Section 6).

#### 4: Pure Testimony Cases and the Function of Names

Given a Millian picture of names, a natural enough idea is that the *function* of a proper name is to allow for a specifically *referential* form of communication—that is, a form of communication about an object that does not go by way of a description that singles it out. And it might seem that pure testimony cases would simply *project* the possibility of referential communication into contexts where some or all participants don't have antecedent familiarity with the object being communicated about. However, the situation is not so simple.

Firstly, many have noted that pure testimony cases are often infelicitous. For example, Evans (1982, 310) points out, it is 'impolite to use the name of something right off if one does not expect one's audience to be able to identify the referent.'<sup>28</sup> Setting aside Evans's stringent theoretical sense of 'identify the referent'<sup>29</sup>, there does seem to be some sort of norm against using a name in cases where one knows or believes one's interlocutor has no familiarity with its referent as such. And it's natural to think that this felt infelicity, impoliteness or abnormality suggests that referential communication

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<sup>26</sup> The pragmatic mechanism by which content is generated will be non-Gricean, since the view holds that speakers cannot grasp the singular content semantically expressed.

<sup>27</sup> This picture relied on Evans's (1982) distinction between 'producers' and 'consumers' in a name-using practice, and on the idea that both kinds of participants in the practice can successfully communicate using the name, although only producers can think singularly about the name's referent as such. See Section 7 of this chapter for discussion of the relation of this picture to the current proposals.

<sup>28</sup> He claims, 'In such a situation, politeness demands that one say, not 'I had dinner with NN', but, 'I had dinner with someone called 'NN'. If true, this would accord well with the claims made here, but my sense is that something along the lines of, 'I had dinner with my friend (my sister/this guy, etc) NN' is just as good. See the end of this section for further discussion.

<sup>29</sup> See Evans (1982, Ch. 4).

in such cases fails. If this is correct, then it blocks *extended-NBT*. But why would it be that communication in pure testimony cases fails? Answering this question requires us to further spell out the function of names.

What is it that names are *for*? What is their communicative function? As Strawson (1974) and Evans (1982) emphasise, they seem to solve a *problem* that would otherwise make it hard for us to communicate about particular individuals when they're not present.<sup>30</sup> We cannot rely on enough natural overlap in the descriptive information about an individual possessed by different speakers to make *describing* that individual a reliable way to communicate about it. If I know that an individual *o* is *the Φ*, I cannot rely on your also knowing that *o* is *the Φ* (you may have other ways of describing *o*, but not this one) so communication by way of description is unreliable. Names help to solve this problem by creating 'an arbitrary distinguishing feature which everyone learns' so that, in using *that* feature of *o* (its name) to communicate about it, I can (more) reliably expect that my interlocutor will know which thing I intend.<sup>31</sup> Thus, it is the institution of a *name using practice* connecting an 'arbitrary distinguishing mark' to a particular individual, which makes communication go smoothly. So, what names function to allow for is coordination on an object *o* as the object of interest, in cases in which interlocutors each have banks or stores of information about *o* that differ (or are likely to differ, or cannot be relied upon not to differ, etc.).

Notice, though, there is only a *problem* for names to solve if what we're aiming at is *coordination*, in the sense that interlocutors already have some body of information about an object *o*—call it a 'mental file' if you like, but this popular terminology is inessential to the basic point—and the aim is to coordinate those existent bodies of information. If the aim were simply to communicate about an object *o*, without necessarily coordinating existing bodies of information, then a description would do just fine: when I say, 'I had lunch with the Φ' and you form the belief that I had lunch with the Φ (without realizing that the Φ is the Italian girl you met last Tuesday) this would count as communicative success.

So the kind of communication it is the *central function* of names to facilitate is the kind in which speaker and hearer coordinate their *existing* bodies of belief about an object *o*. And names function to facilitate this by allowing us to bypass descriptions of the object.<sup>32</sup> I'll call cases like this, in which names perform their primary communicative function, *name-based referential communication*. The communication in such cases is *referential* in that it does not work by way of expressing a descriptive content about the object of communication; it is *name-based* in that it is the kind of case in which names perform their primary function.<sup>33</sup>

But if we view the central function of names as the facilitation of *name-based referential communication*, then this does suggest that pure testimony cases are *deficient*. They are cases in which a name *cannot*

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<sup>30</sup> That is, in cases where contextual cues and tools like demonstrations and perceptual salience allow us to use 'one off', context sensitive, referential devices to communicate about them (see Evans, 1982, Ch.11).

<sup>31</sup> Evans (1982, 380).

<sup>32</sup> It is true that, along with the attachment of an 'arbitrary distinguishing mark' to an object—that is, a name—comes the possibility of using a metalinguistic description ('person called 'NN') to think about an object and in communication, but this is consistent with my claims about the function of names. Names solve a coordination problem through the institution of a practice by which an individual is associated with an arbitrary mark. That this connection can be used to generate a metalinguistic description does not cause problems for this claim. See also fn.54.

<sup>33</sup> That is, not every case in which a name is used is one in which a name performs its primary function. Not all cases of referential communication use names or are name-based.

perform its primary function because one party doesn't yet have a bank or body of information about *o* such that the name can function to 'call it up' and achieve coordination. This would explain the infelicity of pure testimony uses of names: in such cases one is using a linguistic device in a context in which it cannot fulfill its function. When you use a name, you're presuming that your interlocutor has a body of information about its referent that is associated with that name. When she doesn't, you violate norms of use.<sup>34</sup>

On this way of seeing things, pure testimony cases are a bit like cases in which someone uses a demonstrative expression when their interlocutor is blindfolded. You *can* do this and, when you do, it is true that *some* information will indeed be conveyed, but the expression won't fulfill its central communicative function. The function of a demonstrative is to allow for communication about a particular individual by exploiting contextual cues to make clear which individual is intended. If, when you are blindfolded, I point at a woman in the vicinity and say, 'that woman is from Rome', I cannot expect my utterance to perform its primary function. At best, I manage to convey the information that some perceptually salient woman is from Rome. Similarly, the function of a name is to coordinate existing bodies of belief about its referent. If I say utter (1) when you have no existing body of belief about Manuela DeNicola as such, I at best manage to convey the information *that some person named 'Manuela DeNicola' is from Rome*.<sup>35</sup>

This view of pure testimony cases as defective suggests that *extended-NBT* is false because *extended-NBT* only gets off the ground in virtue of there being pure testimony cases where communication is successful. If pure testimony cases are defective, then *extended-NBT* isn't generated.

Having said this, it is worth reflecting again on the initial intuition—that pure testimony cases are infelicitous, impolite or uncooperative—in order to see it too is somewhat shaky and is therefore a starting point at best. We might note that, while discourse initial uses of names in pure testimony contexts are infelicitous, the infelicity is easily resolved by adding supplementary descriptive information to the name. Me beginning an exchange with (1) may be problematic if you don't know Manuela DeNicola, but beginning with (3) or (4) seems fine:

- (3) My brother's friend, Manuela DeNicola, is from Rome
- (4) This girl I know, Manuela DeNicola, is from Rome

Since these felicity-making descriptive supplementations could fall short of providing an individuating description for the name's referent, you might think pure testimony cases still force *extended-NBT* on us.<sup>36</sup>

But, even if so, the suggestion that pure testimony cases are defective *qua cases of name use* and therefore fail to support *extended-NBT* is not immediately defeated. Firstly, one might claim that the infelicity of pure testimony uses was just a starting point, which ultimately served to uncover a point about the function of names that does not rely on it. Secondly, perhaps even grammatically felicitous pure

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<sup>34</sup> You may think that pure testimony uses of names cause hearers to initiate new files—or banks of information—on the referent of the name. More on this in Section 5.

<sup>35</sup> Note, a person could form this belief and initiate a body of information about the (salient) person called 'Manuela DeNicola', such that they would add information to the body when it was believed to be information about the (salient) person called 'Manuela DeNicola'. See section 5 for discussion of the relevance of this fact to *extended-NBT*.

<sup>36</sup> Goodman (2018, 4). (4) works despite the existence of many girls called 'Manuela DeNicola'. Does (3) work even if my brother has two friends so named? I'm not sure, but perhaps it does.

testimony uses are defective *qua* cases of name-use. Perhaps, for example, the felicity-making descriptive supplementations like those in (3) and (4) in fact function to highlight and mitigate the fact that a name is being used without the expectation that it can perform its primary communicative function. The additional descriptive information provides some context for the name-use, and thereby makes the communication go more smoothly, despite the fact that the name cannot fulfill the primary function of a name. More discussion of the range of cases is necessary.

### 5: Referential Communication, Significant Objects and the Learning of Names

Section 4 illustrated the shape that one kind of argument against *extended-NBT* might take: it might start with the idea that the function of names is to allow for *name-based referential communication*, and be based on the claim that pure testimony cases are cases in which a name cannot perform its primary function. But, this leaves out part of the story about the function of names. And this part forms the beginning of a story about how name-use might be said to generate singular thought.

The story about the function of names already discussed is that the role of a name is, to use Evans's terms, to provide 'an arbitrary distinguishing mark', the use of which allows speakers to coordinate their existing, differing but coreferential, bodies of information. The part left out so far is that this role can only be *fulfilled* if the arbitrary distinguishing mark is one that everyone in the community (or relevant part of the community, or relevant contexts) *knows*. This means that it is required by the function of names that there is a *norm* that one should *learn* the names of people and things one takes oneself (and others) to have cause to communicate about across a range of different contexts.<sup>37</sup>

What does this mean for generally competent speakers of a language? If they come across an unfamiliar name being used—that is, if they find themselves playing the role of hearers in a pure testimony case—then this is an indication of the significance of the name's referent for some group: it is an indication that others in the community take themselves to have cause to communicate about this object across a range of contexts.<sup>38</sup> Thus, as a competent speaker, if you come across a name being used in some salient corner of your community, this is an indication that you ought to learn it. That is, an indication that you ought to *form* a body of beliefs and attach the name to it—or, to use the optional terminology, you ought to open a *mental file* and label it with the name.<sup>39</sup>

What is it for a body of beliefs (or a file) to be 'labeled' with the name? All this comes to is that the name will play what I will call a *governing role* with respect to the way information is handled for that body of information (or file).<sup>40</sup> When new information arises, the question of whether this information should be included in *this* body of information depends on the answer to the question, 'is this information about *the object called 'NN''*?. Only information for which the answer is 'yes' belongs. In

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<sup>37</sup> It may be important to be able to communicate about an object in *this* context but, if we don't expect this need to project into various contexts, a one-off device (like a demonstrative), or a description is more likely to be adequate.

<sup>38</sup> See Jeshion (2009) for work that takes a Strawsonian starting point, but emphasizes the connection between name-use and the significance of the object named. Also note: I'm claiming the norm to learn a name is contingent on the object being one that an individual takes themselves (and others) to have cause to communicate across a range of contexts (the norm is not that one should learn all the names). This is different to Jeshion's significance requirement, but is not unrelated to it.

<sup>39</sup> Of course, there are files or bodies of information not associated with names, but the point of one that is attached to a name is (partly) to facilitate name-based referential communication.

<sup>40</sup> See Goodman (2016a) for more on governance of mental files. Here, I advert to what's there called, 'the gatekeeping role'. Note also that the story told there about governance and gatekeeping for files bears some resemblance to Geirsson's account (in this volume) of the role that information in a file can play in generating anti-substitution intuitions for coreferential names.

other words, encountering a new name in some salient corner of your community comes with a norm that you should form a body of information that is then kept in the kind of order that would make *name-based referential communication* using that name possible on future occasions.

It might be suggested that this gives us a way to motivate *extended-NBT* despite the points made in Section 4. Perhaps it is true that the function of names is to facilitate *name-based referential communication* but, since this function relies on a norm that new names should be learned, *pure testimony cases* are cases in which competent speakers of the language can be converted into speakers who are in a position, on future occasions, to take part in *name-based referential communication* about a name's referent? So (assuming that taking part in name-based referential communication requires singular thought about the name's referent) name use does generate previously unavailable singular thoughts about the name's referent after all.<sup>41</sup>

I do think it is basically reasonable to think that, in this way, pure testimony cases play a role in converting language-users into speakers who can participate in *name-based referential communication* with a particular name. And, it's worth noting that this suggestion marks a choice-point for extended NBT proponents: Do they think that discourse initial uses of names in pure testimony contexts constitute successful name-based communication? Or are they happy with the kind of story suggested here about how name-use might generate singular thoughts about the name's referent?

If so, it remains true that discourse initial uses of names in pure testimony contexts are cases in which names cannot perform their primary function—that is, even if they are part of the story about one way they can come to perform this function in the future.

However, it is important that while the suggestion in this section points in the direction of a defense of *extended-NBT*, it falls short of amounting to a such a defense. This is for a basic reason to be discussed next: even if name-use in pure testimony cases puts speakers in a position, in the future, to take part in successful *name-based referential communication*, it is not to be taken for granted that *name-based referential communication* requires singular thoughts of its participants. That is, even cases in which names do perform their primary function, we cannot simply assume that it is required that participants think singular thoughts about the name's referent. Another way to put this: Setting aside *extended-NBT*, NBT itself—even when restricted to paradigm cases of name-use—is disputable. And, it might be suggested that thinking about the function of names and the nature of name-based referential communication in fact shows that the connection between name-use and singular thought is not what NBT assumes it to be. This is the subject of the next section.

## **6: Name-Based Referential Communication and Singular Thought**

As things have been presented here, *extended-NBT* depends, unsurprisingly, on whether NBT is true. I'll start with a very flat-footed version of the worry that might be pressed upon NBT proponents: our reflections on the function of names yields no obvious sense in which *name-based referential*

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<sup>41</sup> Setting aside some important details of her view, this suggestion does bear similarity to Jeshion's (2002, 2010) outlook, in that it connects names to singular thought via a concept of significance (albeit through a somewhat different conception of significance than the one proposed by Jeshion). Jeshion's view is essentially that significance is a condition on, and also produces, both name-use *and* singular thought because it triggers the formation and use of a mental file. The suggestion I'm considering is that singular thoughts are required to understand name-based referential communication, that name-based referential communication requires interlocutors to coordinate their coreferential mental files, and that the significance that is indicated by coming across a new name causes one to open a name-governed mental file. Insofar as this is similar to Jeshion's view, this brings out the sense in which it might be fair to count Jeshion as a proponent of *extended-NBT* (not just NBT) even if she might not classify herself as such.

*communication* requires *singular* thoughts about the referent of the name on the part of its participants. The function of names is to allow for coordination of coreferential bodies of information—or mental files, if you prefer—which cannot be relied upon to contain overlapping descriptive information. This coordination is achieved when speakers associate the same ‘arbitrary distinguishing mark’ with their bodies of information. On the face of things, it seems consistent with this that the thoughts of participants are *descriptive* in nature rather than *singular*. In other words, it seems reasonable to ask: why can’t the bodies of information being coordinated in a case of *name-based referential communication* be based on descriptive ways of thinking about their object, even if they are also associated with a name?<sup>42</sup> As long as there are interlocutors with bodies of information about a particular individual, the aim is to coordinate those bodies of information, and the same name is associated with those bodies of information, then that name can perform its primary function. That which it is the function of names to facilitate seems to have nothing in particular to do with singular thought.

Setting aside a broader commitment to *semantic content accessibility* for now (we’ll address this issue in the next section), the commitment to NBT seems to rely on the assumption that thoughts employing bodies of information—mental files, to use the popular language—*must* be singular. In this sense, the approach we’ve taken, which focuses on the function of names to ask about their connection with singular thought, finds a natural meeting place with the focus of the singular thought literature in recent years. Those familiar with the literature will know that leading recent leading theorists do indeed make the assumption that file-thinking must be singular. They hold what I have called the *mental files conception of singular thought* (MFC): that all and only file-based thought is singular.<sup>43</sup> I myself have rejected this view elsewhere,<sup>44</sup> but it *is* a way to connect name-use to singular thought, which respects the points made above about the function of proper names. We can therefore note that MFC is one way to defend NBT.<sup>45</sup>

Building a case for or against MFC is not our aim here, but it’s worth giving a sense both of the motivation for it and the reasons it can be rejected.<sup>46</sup>

One reason people have held MFC is that they’ve thought that the constitutive features of file-hood are inconsistent with descriptivism about any file based thoughts: mental files are said not to be individuated by the descriptive information stored in them and their semantic content is also said not to be identified with this descriptive information. The same file can persist while descriptive information is discarded and added. Despite variation of descriptive information in a file over time, beliefs employing the file are said to be *continued beliefs*.<sup>47</sup> In addition, mistaken information about the referent, which is contained in a file, is said not to defeat referential success. Thus, the semantic

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<sup>42</sup> Note, that this is so for several different conceptions of what it means for a thought to be based on a descriptive way of thinking of an object: the thought can have its object determined by description, it can involve ‘description-centred cognition’ and so forth. A plausible case in which the thoughts on which the bodies of information involved in name-based referential communication are descriptive is the one discussed in Section 5, where the body of information was itself formed on the basis of a pure testimony case, such that governing description is metalinguistic: ‘the person called, NN’.

<sup>43</sup> The view is often simply assumed, but the most well-known proponents (whose work is valuable in part because they attempt to argue for MFC) are Recanati (e.g. 2012, 2015) and Jeshion (e.g. 2002, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> See Goodman (2016a), (2016b), (2018) and (ms.) for a case against MFC.

<sup>45</sup> I take this to be one dimension of Jeshion’s strategy, and it is part of the value of her work that it has made this connection clear.

<sup>46</sup> It’s implied by the above that one motivation is to adopt a theory of singular thought that maintains *semantic content accessibility*. And, indeed, it’s fair to say this is also one motivation for Jeshion.

<sup>47</sup> See Perry (1980).

content of thoughts employing the file cannot be equated with the entirety of the information stored in it. Since the semantic content of a file-based thought is not identified with the descriptive information stored in the file, the story goes, the semantic content must be singular rather than descriptive.<sup>48</sup>

However, as Goodman (2016) points out, it is consistent with the idea that files are not individuated by the entirety of the descriptive information stored in them and their semantic content is not given by a conjunction of this information, that some files are descriptive, and that the semantic content of thoughts employing these files is descriptive. In a ‘descriptive file’, individuation conditions and reference determination for the file are not determined by the entirety of the descriptive information stored in the file, but by a *privileged* piece of descriptive information (or subset of the descriptive information). Short of a mere stipulation that what we mean by ‘singular thought’ is *file-based* thought, it certainly doesn’t follow from a thought’s being file-based that it is singular.<sup>49</sup>

Another motivation for MFC comes from the suggestion that mental files give us an empirically respectable and purportedly cognitively real way of understanding the admittedly murky category of singular thought. And, indeed, MFC proponents have tended to appeal (albeit somewhat loosely) to cognitive scientific work on mental files to motivate their view. Again, a full discussion of the issues is beyond the scope of this piece, but it is far from clear (and I’ll venture to say, unlikely) that the philosophers’ notion of a mental file—essentially, a body of coordinated beliefs allowing for a certain characteristic kinds of justified inference—picks out the same thing as the notions on offer in the cognitive scientific literature. Most centrally, the cognitive scientific files philosophers most frequently appeal to are posited to explain specifically perceptual phenomena.<sup>50</sup> Even if the cognitive scientific work that posits ‘files’ demonstrates that certain perceptual states are singular, there is no reason to think these points extend to the non-perceptual or ‘long term’ files philosophers posit as used in name-based communication.<sup>51</sup>

One way to see how optional the view is that the thoughts involved in *name-based referential communication* are *singular*, is to step back from the terminology of ‘mental files’ and the common (in my view mistaken) attendant associations with singularity, and focus instead simply on the fact that names function to allow speakers to coordinate coreferential *bodies* or *banks of information*. Seen this way, it seems arbitrary to insist that the thoughts involved should be singular. Why should all thoughts attached to bodies of information be singular? What, about the very idea of a collection of information implies the singularity of the thoughts attached to such a collection? Why would the fact of information being clustered or organized as a body that is assumed to corefer imply singular rather than descriptive thought?<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Grice (1969), Evans (1985), Donnellan (1978), Perry (1980), Recanati (2012, 2015) for elaboration of the file-picture. See Goodman and Gray (ms) for critical discussion of its commitments.

<sup>49</sup> Wisely, central proponents of MFC speak against this kind of stipulation (See Jeshion, 2010)).

<sup>50</sup> In particular, success in *multiple object tracking* tasks (see, Storm & Pylyshyn (1988)) and *object specific preview benefits* (see, Kahneman, Treisman and Gibbs (1992)). The files linguists appeal to are different, but it’s less clear why such file-based thought should be construed as singular.

<sup>51</sup> The proposal that they do is described by Murez, Smortchova and Strickland (2020) as ‘The Projection Argument’. They claim current empirical research does not support that proposal. See Geirsson (2018) for a similar suggestion.

<sup>52</sup> This raises a final possible motivation for the idea that all thoughts involved in name-based referential communication are singular. This is found in the storied but somewhat nebulous connection between singular thought and *de jure coreference*, or inferences that ‘trade on identity’ (Campbell (1987)). It takes me too far afield to discuss this here but the motivation is examined and argued against in Goodman (ms). See Taylor (2010) and especially Dickie (2015) for attempts to clarify what this connection is meant to be. Although I disagree with this aspect of her view, Dickie’s is the

Despite the suggestion above that it seems that names can perform their primary function without singular thoughts on the part of users, the idea that thoughts attached to bodies of information or mental files are singular has had a strong influence on thinking about the connection between names and singular thought even in the work of those who have been clearest about the functional role of names. In recent literature, the connection has played an important role in Robin Jeshion's work on the function of names and the nature of singular thought (Jeshion, 2002, 2009, 2010). In earlier literature, Evans (1982) combines the insights about the function of names, which are the basis for my points in Sections 4 and 5, with the claim that names invoke 'information-based thoughts'. These are thoughts that are 'governed' by an information-relation (like perception or testimony) to the object they are about, and are thereby *singular* not *descriptive thoughts*.<sup>53</sup> However, the line suggested by denying NBT is that the claim that names invoke specifically information-based thoughts is not entailed, or even really suggested, by the communicative function of names.

### 7: Singular Linguistic Content and Singular Thought: Denying Content Accessibility

In the previous section we saw the way that NBT can be connected with the mental files conception of singular thought (MFC), thereby pointing in the direction of one way to defend a modest version of *extended-NBT*. I also outlined an opposing suggestion: that there is no sense in which paradigmatic *name based referential communication* requires singular thoughts of its participants. But this suggestion may sound odd to some. A way to bring this out is to voice some questions it will raise. First, if *name-based referential communication* does not require singular thoughts of participants, in what sense is it *referential*—that is, why should we think the *semantic content expressed* in such communication is *singular*? Is rejecting NBT consistent with Millianism? Second, if the semantic content expressed in such cases *is* singular, then doesn't the suggestion imply that participants need not understand the utterances involved in these communications?

Discussion of these questions allows us to elaborate the outlook that rejects NBT, and to see how it preserves Millianism by rejecting *semantic content accessibility*. This approach can make space—on at least one way of spelling it out—for an important connection between proper names and singular thought. But it will not be the connection usually assumed to hold.

First, on the picture being outlined, in what sense is *name-based referential communication* indeed *referential*—that is, in what sense, if any, is the communication *singular*? The obvious sense in which the communication is singular is that it bypasses the need to express a descriptive content that singles out the object of interest. It does this by exploiting an 'arbitrary distinguishing mark', *rather* than a description the object uniquely satisfies.<sup>54</sup> But why should we think that the *semantic content expressed* in such cases is singular? The answer is related to the fact that we cannot assume sufficient overlap in the descriptive information possessed by different individuals to make describing an individual a

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most promising version of the suggestion. Skating over many details, her approach is to say that beliefs that are part of bodies of beliefs are formed and bundled through a particular kind of information-management activity that gives rise to *cognitive focus*. The result of cognitive focus is to bring a particular object before the mind in a relation of robust or genuine 'aboutness'. And this, for her, is what singular, but not descriptive thought, involves.

<sup>53</sup> A thought is governed by an information relation when the thinker's assessment of its truth or falsity is determined by information gained through that relation. See, e.g. Evans (1982, p. 121-2).

<sup>54</sup> Note, it is consistent with this that the existence of a practice whereby the arbitrary distinguishing mark, 'NN', is associated with a particular individual makes it the case that the individual bears a property which could be used to describe it: the property of *being called* 'NN'. See also Hawthorne and Manley (2012, 227-33) for a distinction between *describing uses* and *calling uses* of names.

reliable way to communicate about it. Imagine all the different ways that different individuals might have at their disposal to describe an object *o*, and note that what these descriptions have in common is that they are descriptions of the same object: *o*. A natural theoretical move is to say that the semantic content of the expression—which does not have the content of any of the particular descriptions associated with it but whose function it is to coordinate these—is *o*. A similar idea is in fact stressed by a Millian like Soames (2002, Ch.3) who, (setting aside his endorsement of NBT) holds that the *semantic content* of a name can be identified with the informational content that is common across the range of descriptive contents associated with the name by different speakers. Soames claims that these differing descriptive contents may be *conveyed* by uses of the name, but only what is common between them makes its way into the semantic content expressed.

Second, isn't this view one on which participants in successful name-based referential communication need not understand the utterances involved? Goodman (2018) denies this implication by suggesting that understanding an *utterance* need not involve grasping the singular content semantically expressed by it. The proposal is thereby that *semantic content accessibility* does not hold for paradigm cases of communication involving names. This may seem to some like a bullet to bite, but there are at least two ways to defend this move that make it seem not only acceptable, but motivated. Again, an initial elaboration, rather than a full defense, is what this chapter offers.

The first way is the simpler one. It involved pointing out that the falsity of *semantic content accessibility* is in fact unsurprising for basically the simple reason stated in Section 3, and elaborated by the discussion of the function of names in Sections 4 and 5. Names are a social tool, used (paradigmatically) to coordinate (potentially) differing bodies of information that nonetheless have in common that they are about the same thing. Their function makes it the case that the content semantically expressed by uses of sentences containing them is singular. It is the common object of interest, rather than the semantic content of the attending thoughts of speakers, that is marked by the semantic content of the *expression*. And therefore grasping that singular content is not what's required to successfully use the social tool to perform its function. This means that one can count as understanding a use of a name—even in a case of name-based referential communication—when the semantic content of one's thought differs from the semantic content expressed.

A second way to defend the potential gap that opens up between the semantic content expressed by a use of a name and the contents of the thoughts of speakers who understand these uses, is inspired by Evans's (1982, Ch. 11) account of name-using practices, and was laid out in Goodman (2018).<sup>55</sup> This way to motivate rejecting *semantic content accessibility* ties the semantic content expressed by proper names more straightforwardly to facts about the contents of the thoughts of (some) users, but claims that this semantic content aligns only with the thought contents of a group of users who play a privileged role in the name-using practice.

Evans's idea was that name using practices have an asymmetric two-tier structure. There are two ways to participate successfully in such practices. The possibility of successful *name-based referential communication* is supported by the existence of systematic practices where by 'Manuela' is used to refer to Manuela, 'Luciana' is used to refer to Luciana, 'Felicia' is used to refer to Felicia, and so on. *Producers* in a particular name-using practice are users of the name who have the ability to think singular thoughts about the name's referent *as such*. They are speakers who can think true singular thoughts that might

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<sup>55</sup> See also Geirsson (2013, Ch. 5) & (2018) for what I understand to be a rejection of semantic content accessibility, and a connection with Salmon's (1987) distinction between strong and weak understanding of a proper name.

be expressed with, ‘*that* is Manuela’ or ‘*she* is Luciana’. They have an independent ability to think singular thoughts about the referent of ‘NN’, and also knowledge that the object of those thoughts is NN. According to Evans, the role of producers in a practice is to anchor the name to its referent. That is, the fact that Manuela is the individual who producers judge to be named ‘Manuela DeNicola’ is what *makes* it the case that the name ‘Manuela DeNicola’ refers to the individual to whom it refers. One of Evans’s central contributions was to make this claim about the role of producers in a name-using practice plausible, by pointing out that cases in which the judgments of producers *shift* (such that a different object is now identified as the bearer of ‘NN’) are cases of *reference change*.<sup>56</sup>

What is particularly crucial for the rejection of NBT, however, is that a producer’s independent ability to entertain singular thoughts about the referent of a name, in addition to her knowledge of the referent *as the bearer of the name*, is what accounts for her ability to grasp the singular content expressed by a use of a name, rather than the other way around. Her participation in name-based referential communication—whether in a pure testimony case or after initiation into a name-using practice through a pure testimony case—does not generate the ability to think singular thoughts about the name’s referent. Rather, this ability serves to anchor the name’s semantic content without necessarily being available to all participants in the name-using practice.

However, being a *producer* is not the only way to successfully participate in a name-using practice. A *consumer* is a speaker who can successfully communicate using a name but is not a producer. Consumers are participants in the practice who do *not* have independent knowledge of the referent of the name *as such*. For example, a speaker who becomes able to take part in *name-based referential communication* with a particular name through initiation into the name-using practice in a *pure testimony case* will be a consumer in the practice. Such users cannot grasp the singular semantic content expressed by uses of sentences containing the name, but this does not mean they cannot successfully participate in the practice and communicate using the name. This provides an explanation of how a speaker could understand a use of a sentence containing a name without grasping the semantic content expressed.

The first of these two options is a simpler route to denying *semantic content accessibility* for communication involving names. The second has the benefit (or flaw, depending on your point of view) of tying the semantic content expressed by names more straightforwardly to the semantic content of the thoughts of speakers (in particular, *producers*). A related way to adjudicate between the two options is to ask whether a name-using practice could exist for which there were no producers, and never have been any. The Evans-inspired route to rejecting semantic content accessibility rests the semantic content of a name on the judgments of producers.<sup>57</sup> If we think that a practice that supports successful *name-based referential communication* could be built and sustained on the use of a name that is brought into the language through an act of descriptive reference-fixing, then perhaps this speaks against the Evans-inspired view. This makes the connection between names and singular thought weaker still. But, either way, neither option presented here requires of participants in successful name-based referential communication that they have singular thoughts about the name’s referent, and both options hold that the semantic content expressed by uses of names is singular. Both

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<sup>56</sup> The point that semantic reference is determined by and tracks the judgments of users was first made, without the distinction between *producers* and *consumers* that makes its way into the more sophisticated version of the picture, in Evans (1985).

<sup>57</sup> The way in which it does will have to be spelled out carefully, since we want to allow that there are name-using practices for which the names have determinate semantic content despite the fact that all producers have died or lost their status as such.

are thereby consistent with the suggestion that thinking about the function of names speaks against NBT and thereby *extended*-NBT.

An upshot of the perspective that rejects NBT and its extension is worth mentioning in conclusion. If NBT has been taken as a reason to think there are singular thoughts about external objects, acquaintance-less singular thoughts, a wide range of singular thoughts, and so forth, rejecting NBT highlights the need to give arguments, from within the philosophy of mind, for these now-popular views. But, given the murkiness of the category of singular thought, the stalemate with descriptivists about why we should think there are such thoughts, and the lack of clarity about their role in a broader theory of mind, this invitation to singularists who reject NBT should arguably be a welcome one.

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