

On the supposed connection between proper names and singular thought

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Received: 8 October 2015 / Accepted: 22 August 2016
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Abstract A thesis I call the *name-based singular thought thesis* (NBT thesis) is part of orthodoxy in contemporary philosophy of mind and language: it holds that taking part in communication involving a proper name puts one in a position to entertain singular thoughts about the name's referent. I argue, first, that proponents of the NBT thesis have failed to explain the phenomenon of name-based singular thoughts, leaving it mysterious *how* name-use enables singular thoughts. Second, by outlining the reasoning that makes the NBT thesis seem compelling and showing how it can be resisted, I argue that giving up the NBT thesis is not (as is usually assumed) a cost, but rather a benefit. I do this by providing an expanded conception of *understanding* for communication involving names, which sheds light on the nature of communication involving names and the structure of name-using practices.

Keywords Singular thought · Proper names · Causal theory of names · Testimonial acquaintance

There is a widespread assumption among philosophers of mind and language that the linguistic phenomenon of using proper names must be tightly connected to the mental phenomenon of entertaining singular (or *de re*) thoughts. This is often manifest in the claim that taking part in communication involving a proper name is by itself sufficient for entertaining singular thoughts about the name's referent. I call this claim the *Name-Based Singular Thought Thesis* (NBT thesis):

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(**NBT thesis**) Taking part in communication involving a proper name is by itself sufficient for entertaining singular thoughts about the name's referent.

In this paper, I argue that, despite the frequent assumption that the NBT thesis must be true, there are reasons to doubt its truth. Furthermore, rejecting the NBT thesis is not a cost, but rather one part of a picture that sheds light on singular thought, communication involving proper names and name-using practices. Thus, rejecting the NBT thesis provides for a better understanding of names, thought, communication and the relationships between them.

1 An argument for name-based singular thought

I begin by explaining why the NBT thesis is so popular.

The following simple argument shows how popular commitments concerning the semantics of proper names and the kind of knowledge involved in speaking and understanding a language can make the NBT thesis seem not just attractive, but obligatory.

Argument 1: For the NBT

- P1: The sole semantic contribution of a proper name to a sentence containing it is its bearer. (*Millianism* about proper names)
- P2 (from P1): The semantic content expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing a proper name is a singular content.¹
- P3: Understanding an utterance made with a sentence, *s*, involves grasping the semantic content expressed by *s*. (*Semantic Content Accessibility*)²
- C1: Understanding an utterance made with a sentence containing a name involves thinking a singular thought.³

If the meaning of a proper name is its bearer, then an utterance of a sentence containing a proper name must express a singular content. Assuming *content accessibility*, this means understanding the utterance would involve grasping a singular content. So, if you have understood an utterance of a sentence containing a name, you must have entertained a singular thought. It therefore seems that the simplest picture of commu-

¹ I'm assuming a structured picture of content here, rather than a possible worlds view. This is in part because it's unclear how to make out the distinction between singular and general *content* when assuming contents are sets of worlds. It's worth noting that P2 only follows from P1 given certain assumptions about sentence content and the way that the meaning of sentence parts contribute to the content of whole sentences: namely that sentence content is structured, and that sentence parts contribute their meanings to the content of whole sentences *as* parts of the contents of those whole sentences.

² *Semantic Content Accessibility* forges a link between utterance understanding and grasp of the proposition semantically expressed by that utterance. It is thus closely connected to various principles based on the same intuitive connection. The most famous is Kripke's *Disquotation Principle* (from Kripke 1979, 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*'. Kripke's principle is widely endorsed, e.g., in Soames (2002) and Hawthorne and Manley (2012). Other principles based on the same link are Jeshion (2001) *Accessibility of Content*, Hawthorne and Manley (2012) *Anti-Latitude* and Recanati (1993) *Congruence Principle*.

³ For now, let's assume that a singular thought is a mental state with singular content. I'll return to the definition of singular thought in Sect. 4.

nication leads to the view that singular thought occurs in all contexts in which names are successfully used to communicate.

This argument doesn't generate the claim that name-use *enables* singular thought, but we can get to this claim by noting some features of certain cases of successful communication involving names. In at least some cases, it appears that successful communication takes place—so we're inclined to say *understanding* occurs—despite the fact that the hearer, or even the speaker *and* the hearer, lack any *independent* means of having a singular thought about the name's referent. The fact that understanding takes place in such contexts shows (again, assuming *semantic content accessibility*) that the hearer has grasped the semantic content expressed by the speaker's utterance. But, since there is no independent explanation of the grasp of this content, it looks as if participating in the communication is itself what provides this explanation.

To be clear, the NBT thesis is an *explanatory* claim about communication with names. It is supported by an intuition that there is understanding in cases of name-use where the subject who achieves such understanding does not have an independent means by which to grasp the singular content expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing a name.

2 Pure testimony cases

Given that the NBT thesis is the view that name-use explains the availability of singular thoughts that would otherwise have been unavailable, the relevant kind of case for showing its truth or falsity is what I'll call a *pure testimony case*.

Here's an example of a pure testimony case. You have a friend, Bruno, who I have never heard of, and about whom I know nothing at all. You tell me that Bruno is tall, by uttering (1):

(1) Bruno is the tallest person I know⁴

The NBT proponent's claim is that encounters of this kind enable me to have, not just thoughts about Bruno, but *singular thoughts* about him.⁵

The features of a pure testimony case are that communication about an object takes place, but the audience of the communication (1) doesn't already have singular thoughts about the name's referent that she can bring to bear in grasping the singular content expressed by the utterance, and (2) doesn't have independent resources to form singular thoughts about the name's referent (which for some reason simply haven't previously been activated), which she could bring to bear in grasping the content expressed by the utterance.

What do I mean by 'independent resources that haven't previously been activated'? Think of a case in which there is an object in your current visual field, which you haven't noticed. In such a case, it might be true that you haven't ever had a singular, perceptual

⁴ It might be noted that, discourse initially, this utterance is potentially infelicitous if I have never heard of Bruno before. See the end of this section for discussion of this point.

⁵ Surprisingly, it is often overlooked that the intuition that an encounter of this kind enables me to think thoughts about Bruno is *not* in itself support for the NBT thesis. Obviously, if these thoughts are descriptive, the NBT thesis is not supported.

demonstrative thought about the object, and also true that you might *never* have one if not for an act of communication in which a perceptual demonstrative expression is used to bring the object to your attention. In this case, a counterfactual of the form, ‘if not for taking part in this communication you would not have had any singular thoughts about *x*’ is true. However, it is also true that you have independent resources to form singular thoughts about the object in question. This is so even if an act of communication is what brings it about that you form these singular thoughts. Another way to put this is that the singular thoughts involved in this case are perception-based demonstrative thoughts. The capacity to have these thoughts might be *activated* by communication, but successfully participating in the communication itself depends on the *independent ability* to think a singular thought, not the other way around.

In contrast, a pure testimony case does not have this structure. It is a case in which you have no independent ability to think a singular thought about the name’s referent, which we could appeal to in order to explain your understanding of the utterance in question. The NBT proponent is someone who thinks that participating in a pure testimony case makes it possible to think (not just descriptive thoughts about a name’s referent but) singular thoughts about it.

So (in addition to accepting Argument 1) the intuition we need to have for the NBT thesis to seem compelling is that there *are* pure testimony cases that are cases of successful communication: cases where someone has been told something, and understood what they have been told. It is therefore worth noting from the start that, if you *don’t* have this intuition, then it isn’t clear the NBT thesis should be compelling to you. The reason that the NBT thesis relies on an intuition about pure testimony cases, rather than the broader class of cases involving testimony, is that the NBT thesis is the claim that name-use in particular can generate singular thought. Pure testimony cases isolate the effect of name-use on a thinker’s ability to think singular thoughts about the name’s referent. They therefore allow us to target the question with which we are concerned: *does name-use enable one to entertain a singular thought about the name’s referent?*

It is worth noting that the intuition that there are pure testimony cases that are also cases of successful communication is a bit shaky, and is complicated by a range of factors. For example, there is arguably something infelicitous about discourse-initial uses of names in which one is aware that one’s interlocutor doesn’t already know the person or thing being spoken about. In these cases, adding supplementary descriptive information—something like ‘*my friend* Bruno’—may often be required to make the communication go smoothly.⁶ To the extent that unsupplemented discourse-initial uses of names in contexts where one’s interlocutor has no prior knowledge of the named individual or object do *not* allow for successful communication, this might seem to be a problem for the NBT thesis. However, the observation that these cases are problematic does not simply defeat the NBT thesis. For a start, the kind of supplementary descriptive

⁶ An anonymous reviewer points out that this is the kind of thing we would expect if presuppositional accounts of names were correct (see Geurts 1997; Maier 2009; Maier 2015). Firstly, on such a view, pure testimony cases would be cases requiring presupposition accommodation rather than satisfaction of a presupposition relative to context. Secondly, since relational information is easier to accommodate, adding descriptive information like ‘my friend Bruno’ is appropriate for facilitating communication in such contexts. As I argue in the remainder of the paragraph to which this footnote is attached, however, this does not serve to defeat the NBT thesis.

information required for felicity in the relevant cases is relatively vacuous and certainly need not provide an individuating description of the name's referent (for example, 'this guy Bruno...', 'someone I know, Bruno...', work fine). This suggests that the initial infelicity is generated by a merely grammatical feature of names, and also shows that the resulting supplemented utterances ('my friend Bruno...', 'this guy Bruno...') involve expressions of singular content. To the extent that expressions of singular content can be understood in pure testimony cases, this serves to get the NBT thesis off the ground. Furthermore, I think it is in fact plausible that discourse initial uses of names *do* sometimes go smoothly in cases where there is a lack of independent knowledge of the name's referent. For both these reasons, I will treat the existence of pure testimony cases that involve understanding as a datum from hereon.⁷

Finally, I'll stress at this early stage that, to the extent that there is a *datum* that generates the NBT thesis, the datum is not (as one might be tempted to assume) that there is *singular thought* in pure testimony cases, but rather that there is *understanding* in such cases. We needed to insert a premise like *semantic content accessibility* in order to generate the conclusion that singular thoughts have been entertained in pure testimony cases and, thereby, to support the NBT thesis.

3 The status of the NBT thesis and strategies for rejecting it

Where does the reasoning from Sect. 1 in favor of the NBT thesis leave us?

It shows why people have thought the NBT thesis must be true, but doesn't provide an explanation of *how* the use of a name in communication is meant to enable thinkers to entertain otherwise unavailable singular thoughts. But, if we are going to adopt the NBT thesis, some explanation is called for. We should want an explanation of the mechanisms by which communication involving names produces the ability to entertain new singular thoughts. If no satisfying explanation were available, this would make the NBT thesis less compelling. If it looks mysterious *how* name-use could enable one to think singular thoughts about the name's referent, or if the available account runs afoul of basic desiderata on a theory of singular thought, then this gives us motivation to question the NBT thesis.⁸

Once we look closely at available defenses of the NBT thesis, we'll find ourselves in exactly this position—we'll see that NBT proponents have not succeeded in explaining and justifying the truth of their claim. In Sect. 5 of the paper, I outline the two most substantive attempts to explain the truth of the NBT thesis, and discuss problems with

⁷ Having said this, I'll note that the shakiness of intuitions about successful communication in pure testimony cases already weakens the status of the NBT thesis. Once we've isolated the kind of case that actually supports the NBT thesis, the thesis already seems less obligatory.

⁸ In theory, a similar question also arises for other cases in which we take ourselves to have reason to posit singular rather than descriptive thoughts. In the case of, say perception-based or memory-based singular thought we should ask *how* perception, or memory, produces non-descriptive thoughts. By focusing on name-based singular thought in this paper, I do not mean to suggest that this question does not need to be answered in other cases—in fact, I think it should. The question for perception-based and (arguably) memory-based cases is less pressing, however, because we have a clearer account available of how these cases work. See Sect. 5, in which the particular difficulties of explaining name-based singular thought are discussed, and footnote 23, for further discussion.

these views. But before doing this I want to look ahead and explore (in a preliminary way) possible ways to reject the NBT thesis.

By looking at Argument 1, we can see that the NBT thesis isn't *obligatory*. There are at least two ways to resist it: we could reject *Millianism* about names, or *semantic content accessibility*.

For the purposes of this paper, I will largely set aside the strategy of rejecting Millianism about names. But let me briefly say why. There are two ways the strategy of rejecting the NBT thesis by rejecting Millianism could go, and both have problems. Outlining these problems in a general way gives a sense of my basic outlook on the issues surrounding the NBT thesis. The first way of pursuing this first strategy is that one could reject Millianism about the semantics of names on the basis of one's commitments about singular thought—that is, on the basis of an argument from the philosophy of mind. Consider, for example, Argument 2 below:

Argument 2:

- P1: Understanding an utterance made with a sentence, *s*, involves grasping the semantic content expressed by *s*. (*Semantic Content Accessibility*)
- P2: If proper names are Millian referring expressions, then grasping the semantic content expressed by an utterance containing a name involves entertaining a singular content (having a singular thought).
- P3: Thinking a singular thought about an object *o* requires discriminating knowledge of *o*. (*Identification Requirement on Singular Thought*)⁹
- P4: A competent language user can understand an utterance of a sentence *s* containing a proper name, 'NN', without having discriminating knowledge of the referent of 'NN'.
- C: Proper names are not Millian referring expressions.

There are reasons to be suspicious of Argument 2, but it does provide a *possible* avenue for rejecting the NBT thesis. Furthermore, its premises are not *indefensible*. Take the argument's most controversial premise, P3: the *identification requirement on singular thought*. This requirement has become unpopular in the literature (and any attempt to show how it could be justified is a delicate task far beyond the scope of this paper) but it can be made to look at least *prima facie* intuitively appealing. Imagine a case involving a paradigm instance of a referring expression, a demonstrative used in connection with a perceptual demonstration. If, while pointing at an object, a speaker utters the sentence 'That is beautiful', you will not know what he said unless you know which object he

⁹ The most detailed contemporary defense of the identification requirement on singular thought is found in Evans (1982). A similar requirement sometimes goes by the name of the 'knowledge-which requirement', which states that, in order to think a singular thought about an object *o*, one must know which object *o* is. The point of including an argument involving this (admittedly controversial) premise for my purposes is not to endorse an identification requirement on singular thought, but rather to illustrate how one's antecedent commitments about singular thoughts could lead one to reject the NBT thesis. The idea of an identification requirement on singular thought has its source in Russell (1905, 1910, 1912), from whom we inherit the contemporary distinction between singular and descriptive thought.

pointed to.¹⁰ In turn, to be convinced of P4, contrast the perceptual demonstrative case with a pure testimony case employing a name: You are conversing with a friend about Ginger, an acquaintance of your friend you have not met or heard of before. Your friend says, ‘Ginger is a travelling puppeteer’. In this case, there is arguably a clear sense in which you understand perfectly well what you have been told.¹¹

Setting aside the independent plausibility of the premises of Argument 2, a reason not to pursue the strategy of rejecting Millianism on the basis of an argument of this kind is that we should be suspicious of an approach that let’s our semantics for names be dictated by our theory of singular thought, without considering semantic evidence. It seems more promising to let our semantics be dictated by semantic evidence, and let our theory of singular thought be dictated by considerations in the philosophy of mind, and then think carefully about whether a viable picture of communication and understanding—that is, of the relation between the two—emerges.

The second way to reject the NBT thesis by rejecting Millianism is to reject Millianism because one thinks on the basis of *semantic* considerations that *predicativism* about names—the view that names are metalinguistic predicates—is preferable.¹² In fact, I am relatively sympathetic to this view. However, I set it aside *as a strategy for rejecting the NBT thesis* because being a predicativist about names will not necessarily make the NBT thesis go away. Once the predicativist deals with apparently referential uses of names, and with issues concerning the relationship between the lexicon and content expressed in context, we will still be likely to end up with a view on which *referential uses* of names express singular content in context.¹³ Therefore, an argument of the form of Argument 1, which relies on facts about the apparent uptake of that content in pure testimony cases where communication succeeds will still open the door to the NBT thesis.

This suggests that a more promising strategy for rejecting the NBT thesis is to reject *semantic content accessibility*. If we are suspicious of the idea that convictions about singular thought alone could provide decisive reason to reject a Millian semantics for names, then perhaps we should also hesitate over any argument that bases accepting the NBT thesis—a thesis in the philosophy of *mind*—simply on convictions about the semantics of names. Just as semantic evidence should be central in deciding on a semantic theory for names, so should considerations in the philosophy of mind be central to our inquiry into the conditions for singular thought. But, if we are to respect

¹⁰ See Campbell (2002) for a defense of this claim, although not with a view to defending a general identification requirement.

¹¹ As I’ve already acknowledged in Sect. 2, intuitions go both ways in this kind of case. If the intuition that you *do* understand what you have been told is felt, it is natural to think that what you have understood could be paraphrased as follows: ‘the person named ‘Ginger’ is a travelling puppeteer’, or ‘the bearer of ‘Ginger’ is a travelling puppeteer’. This paraphrase is roughly in line with an account on which names are metalinguistic predicates, as is the conclusion of Argument 2. See footnote 12 for examples of proponents of this view.

¹² See Burge (1973), Bach (1987, 2002), Gray (2012, 2014), Maier (2009, 2015), Matushansky (2008), Geurts (1997), Katz (1990) and Fara (2015).

¹³ For example, Elbourne (2005, Chap. 6), who is a predicativist, claims that referential uses of names contain a free variable, which is assigned a referent directly, by context. Bach (2002) also emphasizes in the context of his ‘nominal description theory’ that referential uses of names communicate singular content in context.

this general principle, something has to give. If one accepts Millianism about names and an identification requirement on singular thought (or some other commitment that leads one to be suspicious of the claim that participating in communication involving a name generates otherwise unavailable singular thoughts about the name's referent), then one will be moved to deny *semantic content accessibility*. This would allow us to accommodate the apparent fact that speakers and hearers manage to communicate successfully in pure testimony cases without committing to the view that they are able to entertain singular thoughts about the name's referent. The general idea behind the strategy of rejecting semantic content accessibility is to reconcile the fact that communication goes smoothly in (some) pure testimony cases with the idea that the thinkers in such cases aren't in a position to grasp the singular content semantically expressed by the utterance. This can be done by trading in semantic content accessibility for a replacement notion of understanding (for the relevant range of cases).¹⁴

With respect to this strategy, I think we will ultimately find ourselves in the following position. We will have to ask: does it look more appealing to accept a claim without a satisfying explanation (the NBT thesis), or to reject an assumption about understanding that might have initially looked plausible? My view is the following. If we can give independent reason to think that semantic content accessibility is dispensable and also give an attractive replacement picture of understanding for the relevant cases, then giving up semantic content accessibility looks appealing, especially in lieu of adopting a theoretical conclusion without a satisfying explanation. Rejecting semantic content accessibility looks even more appealing if our replacement picture of understanding (for communication involving names) actually sheds light on the nature of name-using practices. In Sect. 6, I argue it does exactly this.

I would emphasise, then, that exploring an approach that holds fixed our traditional Millian conception of names but rejects the NBT thesis *by rejecting semantic content accessibility* is not only *possible*, but will turn out to have several advantages. In addition to avoiding the problems with strategies that reject the NBT thesis by rejecting Millianism, this picture has the theoretical advantage of shining a light on semantic content accessibility itself and showing that, in the case of communication involving names, it is independently problematic—we produce a better picture

¹⁴ The resulting position, defended in more detail later in the paper, is in a sense Russellian. Like Russell, this view holds that we think of objects of pure testimony only by description. However, the similarity with Russell is limited to the extent that it posits a *clear gap* (in certain cases) between the content semantically expressed by an utterance containing a name (which is singular) and the nature of the thoughts required in order to count as understanding that utterance (which can be descriptive). Russell is much less clear on the relationship between semantic content linguistically expressed by an utterance and content of the thoughts required to understand it (indeed, he is not clear on the distinction between these two things). In some places, he claims proper names are disguised definite descriptions (and thus seems compelled by an argument like Argument 2). However, as an anonymous reviewer helpfully pointed out, there are also places where he seems to presuppose 1) that an utterance containing a name expresses a singular proposition, and 2) that one can communicate with the utterance despite not grasping that singular proposition. Thus, he comes close to rejecting *content accessibility*. The following passage from Russell (1910) illustrates: "What enables us to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that however we may vary the description (as long as the description is correct) the proposition described is still the same. This proposition, which is described and is known to be true, is what interests us; but we are not acquainted with the proposition itself, and do not know it, though we know it is true."

of name-using practices and communication involving names without it. Finally, this approach produces the strongest argument against the NBT thesis: it illustrates that even dyed-in-the-wool Millians about names should not accept it (however sympathetic one may be to alternative accounts of the semantics of names, one does not need these sympathies to be suspicious of the NBT thesis).

4 What is a singular thought?

The next step will be to outline the two available explanations of the truth of the NBT thesis in the literature, and suggest that both of these leaves us without a satisfying explanation of name-based singular thought. First, though, I pause to say something more about what we mean by ‘singular thought’. Without doing this, it will be hard to pursue the question of whether name-use generates otherwise unavailable singular thoughts.

The difficulty is that the literature lacks an uncontroversial definition of singular thought. The traditional conception defines singular thoughts in terms of their content: Singular thoughts are mental states with singular (as opposed to general) content. (2) & (3) below are representations of two distinct contents:

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

(3) born in America (*Barack Obama*)¹⁵

They are both true at the actual world iff Barack Obama was born in America, but their semantic content is different. (2), which represents a general content, picks out Obama for predication by laying down a descriptive condition he satisfies—it picks out Obama by generalizing over objects. (3), which represents a singular content, picks out Obama because it includes a term which is an individual constant that contributes Obama to the truth conditions of the whole content—in this sense the content itself constitutively involves Obama the individual.¹⁶ The traditional definition says singular thoughts are mental states with content like (3), rather than (2).

There are difficulties with this traditional definition. First, it entails that singular thoughts are object-dependent—a claim that many theorists, including some NBT theorists, deny (Sainsbury 2005; Jeshion 2002, 2010). If we are to assess the success of explanations of name-based singular thought, it is best not to work with a definition that NBT proponents deny. Secondly, the traditional definition is too abstract to give us traction with questions about what enables thinkers to think singular thoughts.¹⁷ When we assign mental states with content, we are using abstract objects, like the contents expressed by (2) and (3), to map the representational or intentional properties

¹⁵ The name ‘Barack Obama’ here should be construed as an individual constant contributing Obama to the truth-conditions of the whole content.

¹⁶ I purposefully remain neutral between Russellian and (non-descriptive) Fregean conceptions of singular content here.

¹⁷ A related point about the limitations of defining singular thoughts in terms of their content is made by Jeshion (2010). She remarks that agreeing on the idea that singular thoughts have singular content does not settle questions about what it takes, cognitively, epistemically, etc., to *think* such thoughts.

of those states. If the only grip we have on the notion of singular thought is that singular thoughts are mental states to which we assign contents like (3) rather than (2), this gives us very little grip on which cognitive, psychological phenomenon we are attempting to explain. It therefore gives us little grip when asking whether a particular case is properly conceived as one of singular thought, and whether some particular explanation of *how* name-use enables singular thought is successful.

Given some particular case of name-based thought, we need a definition of singular thought that gives us at least some sense of what cognitive (or psychological, or epistemological, or informational) features of the state we would be committing to in claiming that the thought in question is singular rather than descriptive. Without this, we cannot assess the success of any particular explanation of how name-use enables the formation of a previously unavailable state of this particular kind.

We can build a working definition meeting this desideratum by thinking about what cognitive or psychological features theorists are trying to capture when assigning a mental state with a content like (2) rather than (3), or vice versa. The idea that a thought has descriptive content is used to capture the idea that it involves employing a set of general concepts, arranged in a certain way such as to net an object (or objects), which satisfies the condition laid out by those concepts.¹⁸ This can be put by saying descriptive thoughts involve thinking about an object *via its properties*, or *merely as the possessor of certain properties*.¹⁹ Singular thought can then be defined negatively by contrast: thinking a singular thought involves thinking of an object, but *not* merely as the possessor of properties *x*, *y*, *z*, or *not* via its properties, but in some other way. Another way of stating this is to say that descriptive thoughts are *satisfactional*—they are about their objects in virtue of the fact that those objects satisfy some descriptive condition laid out in the content of the thought. In contrast, singular thoughts are *non-satisfactional*.²⁰

5 Attempts to explain name-based singular thought

My next task is to outline the central attempts to defend the NBT thesis by explaining *how* name-use enables singular thoughts about a name's referent.²¹ If these explanations are unsuccessful and the phenomenon of name-based singular thought remains mysterious, then this motivates asking whether it is instead plausible to reject the NBT thesis and conclude that name-based thoughts are descriptive rather than singular.

¹⁸ Jeshion (2010, p. 108), agrees: 'For descriptive thought there is widespread agreement [about what it takes to entertain such thoughts]: One must possess and grasp those constituent concepts in the general proposition, must do so in the way in which they are structured in the proposition.' See also, Jeshion (2010, p. 129).

¹⁹ This is in line with Russell (1905, 1910, 1912) conception, according to which one thinks of an object by description when one has only knowledge by description of that object. It is consistent with this conception to reject Russell's very restrictive epistemology, according to which one has merely descriptive knowledge of all ordinary external objects.

²⁰ This terminology is an amended version of Bach's (1987) distinction between *satisfactional* and *relational* reference-determination. I choose to contrast *satisfactional* with *non-satisfactional* (rather than *relational*) thoughts for reasons I need not go in to for present purposes.

²¹ Again, it should be noted that showing how name-use enables thought about the name's referent is not enough to vindicate the NBT thesis, because these thoughts could be descriptive rather than singular.

A look at the literature reveals that attempts to defend the NBT thesis split into two approaches, which correspond to two kinds of explanation of how name-use enables singular thought about a name's referent. I call these 'Causal Externalism' and 'Functionalism' about name-based singular thought.

5.1 The causal externalist

The *causal externalist* essentially thinks that the insights of Kripke (1980) causal theory of names also belong to the theory of thought.²²

The causal externalist's explanation goes as follows. Say that your friend Bruno lives in Paris. You have mentioned Bruno to Betty, who in turn mentioned him to Bob, who mentioned him to Belinda, who mentioned him to me. Betty, Bob, Belinda and I haven't met Bruno and have no beliefs about him apart from what we are told and what we ascertain through our involvement in this communication chain. As it happens, the information about Bruno has become jumbled and Belinda passes on *false* information to me, by uttering (4):

(4) Bruno lives in London

The causal externalist justifies the claim that my resulting thoughts about Bruno are *singular* rather than descriptive, in one of the ways that Kripke justifies the claim that names do not have their reference determined by description. She argues that, given the features of the case, I don't have an identifying description of Bruno available. In fact, the only information I have about Bruno is the false information that he lives in London. If my thought is about Bruno (and we should accept that it is), it could not pick him out in virtue of him satisfying a descriptive condition that I conceptualise. Therefore, by our criterion for the distinction between singular and general thought, my thought about Bruno looks like it is not a satisfactoral thought, but a non-satisfactoral thought. Furthermore, even though I don't have an individuating description for Bruno, I *do* have a causal connection to him, established through the communication chain leading back to him. The causal externalist claims that my thought token is about Bruno in virtue of this causal connection. My thought token picks out Bruno because it is the result of a causal chain that initiates with Bruno.

It is a mark of causal externalism about name-based singular thought that it places explanatory weight on the presence of a *causal connection* to the object of thought. Causal externalists therefore hold that, in cases where the chain of uses of a name does not supply a causal connection to the name's referent—for example, in cases where the meta-semantics for the name is such that it was introduced through an act of descriptive reference-fixing—singular thought is *not* possible.

5.2 Problems for causal externalism

Despite the general popularity among philosophers of causal externalist explanations of the NBT thesis, the difficulty is that that causal externalists have not succeeded

²² Bach (1987) and Devitt (1981) both defend versions of causal externalism but the description here is intended to be broad enough to accommodate other versions of the view.

in providing us with an explanation of the NBT thesis. This is because they have not explained how *communication involving a name* in particular enables singular thought.

As we saw in Sect. 5.1, the causal externalist puts explanatory weight on the idea that cases of name-use involve a causal connection to the name's referent. However, it is certainly not intended that *all* causal relations put us in a position to think singular thoughts about their relata, so the causal externalist proponent of the NBT owes us an explanation of why the causal relations connected to *name-use* are special. But this explanation proves difficult to provide.

A natural answer is that the causal connections involving name-use are distinctive because they involve a chain of *representational acts*. However, if this is the answer, then we ought to ask why cases of testimony employing a definite description in which there is a chain of uses of the description leading back to the denotation of the description aren't generally thought to ground singular thought about the description's denotation. Most philosophers do not claim that testimony with a definite description can generate singular thoughts, but this looks mysterious if the presence of a communication-chain of representational acts is the relevant factor in generating name-based singular thought.

Bach (1987), who provides the most subtle and thoroughly worked-out version of causal externalism, acknowledges this. Bach grants that, when a description is used, in his terms 'as a name', this provides the basis for singular thought about the object referred to by the use of the description (Bach 1987, pp. 32–33). For Bach, a description is used *as a name* in cases when, in tokening the description, the speaker *displays* his *de re* way of thinking, thereby making it possible for the hearer's thought token to 'inherit' the referent of the speaker's, and allowing the hearer to think of the object in the same way (Bach 1987, p. 32).

There is a basic and serious worry here that Bach's view relies too heavily on the metaphors of 'displaying a way of thinking' and 'inheritance' to count as a satisfying explanation of how representational causal chains enable singular thoughts. As far as I can see, Bach doesn't give an account of what it takes to display a *de re* mode of presentation, or of what it means for a MOP to be inherited. But, without cashing out this talk, we are left without the explanation we have been looking for. What in particular would uses of a name and uses of a definite description used *as a name* need to have in common such that they both allow a speaker to 'display' her *de re* mode of presentation such that it could be 'inherited'?²³

I've heard it suggested that Bach (and other causal externalists) could reach here for a story that relies on the idea of a referential use of a definite description. But, it is

²³ By thinking about the explanatory challenge faced by the causal externalist, we can see better why explaining both perception-based and memory-based singular thought is less difficult than explaining name-based singular thought. Causal externalist theories of name-based singular thought rely on the idea that a singular way of thinking gained initially through perception be 'displayed' and thereby 'transferred' across agents and a central difficulty is in understanding what this kind of interpersonal transfer could consist in. This difficulty is not faced in the case of perception-based singular thought and, to the extent that preservation of 'way of thinking' *intrapersonally* is less mysterious than interpersonal transfer, memory-based cases (although interesting and certainly worthy of further explanation) are not as mysterious. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that the comparison between ways the challenge of explanation arises in different cases should be kept in mind.

important to see this could not help the NBT proponent. In typical cases of referential uses of a definite description, the reference of the utterance is generated by the fact that the speaker can rely on the hearer having an *independent* means of referring to the object the speaker uses the definite description to refer to: in [Donnellan's \(1966\)](#) familiar cases, this is a perceptual demonstrative means of referring to the object. The grasp of what is being conveyed by the utterance (or expressed by it, depending on whether one views the phenomenon as pragmatic or semantic) is secured in these cases by an independent means of thinking about the object. However, the cases we are concerned with are *by stipulation* not like this. They are cases in which the hearer does *not* have an independent means of directly referring to the object in question (the question is whether the name or definite description *gives* her a way of doing so). To the extent that the hearer has an independent means of thinking a singular thought about the name's or description's referent, the case will not be a pure testimony case. But, if the hearer doesn't have an independent means of thinking singular thoughts about the referent, appealing to the idea of a referential use of some expression does not help us to understand how she gets one.

In the absence of a clear explanation of how *communicational* causal connections *in particular* enable singular thoughts, the causal externalist faces problems distinguishing cases of communication from other cases.²⁴ Here is a well-known case, originally due to [Schiffer \(1987, p. 49\)](#). I am walking along the beach and come across a footprint, made by your friend Bruno. I lean down and touch the footprint and think about its maker. In both this case and the communication cases, there is a causal *informational* connection to Bruno.²⁵ But, on [Bach's](#) view, the footprint case is not one in which singular thought about Bruno is possible.²⁶ The problem is that we have not been given a principled way of distinguishing the communication case from the footprint case such that, on the resulting view, name-use would play any particularly interesting role in generating singular thought about the name's referent.

The general complaint about the causal externalist version of the NBT thesis is therefore that the causal externalist fails to provide an account of *how* her proposed mechanism for the transfer of singular thought—causal communicational chains—results in the transfer of singular thoughts, where many other kinds of causal chains do not.

You might think this still leaves intact the causal externalist's argument *that* causal communicational chains result in the transfer of singular thought. This argument, outlined at the beginning of [Sect. 5.1](#), was a version of [Kripke's \(1980\)](#) so-called 'semantic argument': in the case of my thoughts about your friend Bruno, I have no identifying description of Bruno, but I am still able to think thoughts about Bruno.

²⁴ See [Raven \(2008\)](#) for an argument that those who defend the notion of communication-based singular thought have failed to account for the proposed distinctive role of communication in generating singular thought. Unlike this paper, Raven's paper is focused, not on the question of the role of *name-use* in generating singular thought, but on the role of communication more generally.

²⁵ On a standard causal account of information, the footprint carries information about its maker. I am not, however, thereby assuming a view on which the footprint has *intentionality* or *aboutness*—this is a further claim (compare, [Dretske 1981](#)).

²⁶ [Bach \(1987, p. 27\)](#) claims that singular thoughts must be based on perception, memory or communication.

Therefore, my thoughts must be singular. However, this form of argument does not succeed in the case of testimony involving reference with a name. We are not actually forced in testimonial cases into the NBT thesis by a version of Kripke's semantic argument. When I am introduced to a new object by an act of communication, a metalinguistic/ metacommunicative descriptive identification of the object is made available. For example, I am able to form an identifying description of Bruno that makes reference to Belinda's act of referring to him ('the person called 'Bruno' who Belinda just referred to/is talking about').²⁷ Furthermore, appealing to a metalinguistic or metacommunicative description to represent one's way of thinking about an object in a pure testimony case does not seem odd or artificial because it seems to accurately reflect one's epistemic situation with respect to the object in such a case: the object of testimony in a pure testimony case is known only as someone other people are talking about (I'll expand on this suggestion in Sect. 6 of the paper).²⁸

5.3 The functionalist

A second version of the NBT thesis does not put explanatory weight on the idea of a causal connection to the object of thought. Instead, it looks to explain name-based singular thought in terms of the functional role of name-use in thought. I'll call this view *Functionalism*.²⁹

The functionalist's claim is that mastery of directly referential terms in natural language comes along with the ability to structure (or restructure) one's thinking in a way that enables singular thought. The first instance of what I call 'functionalism' about singular thought is found in remarks made by Kaplan, in 'Afterthoughts' and 'Demonstratives'. The view expressed there is that a Millian proper name can be introduced into the language by an act of descriptive reference fixing, as in Evan's (1982)

²⁷ Note that a metalinguistic/metacommunicative description making reference to one's interlocutor's act of referring disambiguates between different individuals who bear the same name. Perhaps we could generate cases where there is more than one person called 'NN' *who an interlocutor is referring to*, but these cases will undoubtedly be rare.

²⁸ As an anonymous reviewer points out, one might nonetheless ask whether an argument related to Kripke's *modal argument* establishes that the thoughts in pure testimony cases are singular. After all, one can wonder what would have happened if Bruno's parents had chosen a different name, and can make sense of the idea, say, that, if Bruno had been named otherwise, he would have been better off. However, the possibility of entertaining these counterfactuals does not establish that the thoughts about Bruno in this case are singular. Firstly, we can make sense of these possibilities by responding that thinkers employ actualized descriptions in these cases. Secondly, although there is more to say about this particular response, we can see that this argument does not establish the singularity of the thoughts in such cases by considering the possibilities for counterfactual thought in other comparable descriptive cases. For example, imagine Beth reports to me, 'I met a therapist yesterday. He asked me if I had a happy childhood'. As a result of this testimony, I might think, 'I wonder if the therapist Beth met would have been so interested in her childhood if he had never become a therapist'. I take it the possibility of considering this counterfactual does not establish that my thoughts about the therapist are singular.

²⁹ Examples are Kaplan (1989a, b), and Robin Jeshion (2002, 2009, 2010). Jeshion's view differs from Kaplan's in important ways: Kaplan is a semantic instrumentalist, whereas Jeshion rejects semantic instrumentalism and defends a view she calls *cognitivism* about singular thought. Here I abstract from certain differences between Jeshion's and Kaplan's positions in order to illustrate that they are both committed to *functionalism* about the NBT thesis as I define it in what follows.

‘Julius’ example. By introducing a name in this way, one is, ‘enabled to apprehend singular propositions concerning remote individuals (those formerly known only by description)’ (Kaplan 1989a). Here is a quote from Kaplan:

‘The Introduction of a new proper name by means of a 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.’ (Kaplan 1989a)

You can form an attitude to a singular proposition involving the object that satisfies some description by *introducing* a name for that object. The linguistic act supplies the ability to think new singular thoughts, because it involves a special kind of *cognitive restructuring*. But, the cognitive restructuring that restructures descriptive thought into singular thought doesn’t exploit a causal connection with the term’s referent. So the functionalist grants that, in itself, name-use doesn’t necessarily produce any *informational* change but, rather, it comes with important *psychological changes*.

There are two questions we should ask about this. First, what is the nature of this ‘cognitive structuring or restructuring’? Second, if there is cognitive restructuring, why should we think that the result is to convert descriptive thoughts into *singular* thoughts?

Kaplan doesn’t provide an account of the kind of cognitive restructuring he has in mind, but Robin Jeshion’s work is very helpful here, in that she cashes out this talk of cognitive restructuring. Jeshion (2002, 2009, 2010) characterizes the kind of psychological change she has in mind by appeal to the notion of a *mental file*. When you have or create a name for an object, according to Jeshion, you open a mental file on the object, whose purpose is to store information on that object. When you use the file to think of the object, she says you are able to think of the object in a ‘neutral’, or ‘object-like’ way, and therefore the thoughts that employ that file are *singular thoughts* (Jeshion 2002, p. 67, 2010). So, despite the lack of any new informational state, the use of a name is associated with the opening of a mental file. Names have a certain functional role in thought: to facilitate neutral or non-descriptive thoughts about their referents (Jeshion 2010).

5.4 Problems for functionalism

There is much to say about this move but, for purposes of this paper, I restrict myself to a basic complaint.³⁰ Assuming that the identification of singular thought with file-thinking isn’t definitional—and Jeshion is explicit that it is not (Jeshion 2010, p. 130)—the move from claiming that name-use is associated with file-use, to the claim that the resulting thoughts are singular does not follow.

³⁰ For a critical discussion of the claim that use of a mental file in entertaining a thought entails that one’s thought is singular see Goodman (2015, 2016).

Think of a mental file as a cluster of predicates believed to be co-instantiated, which are stored together and used together in a mental economy.³¹ Files are a mode of mental organization—they involve a means of storing information such as to allow for its efficient and streamlined use.³² We therefore have to ask why it is necessarily the case that thoughts that employ files are singular thoughts. Why would creating a mental file convert one's descriptive thoughts into singular thoughts?

One reason people have thought that file-based thought is necessarily singular is that mental files are not individuated by the descriptive information stored in them; nor is their semantic content to be identified with the descriptive information stored in them. It is a feature of mental files that descriptive information can be discarded from a file, and new information can be introduced, while the same file continues to exist. Despite the variation of descriptive information in the file, beliefs employing the file can involve the continuation of the same belief.³³ Furthermore, a file can contain mistaken information about its referent without this defeating its referential success. This entails that the semantic content of a file-based thought cannot be given simply by the entirety of the information stored in the file. A natural thought is therefore that, since the semantic content of a file-based thought is not to be identified with the descriptive information stored in the file, this entails that the semantic content of file-based thoughts must be singular rather than descriptive.

However, the fact 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 descriptive information, is in fact entirely consistent with the idea that some files are descriptive, and that the semantic content of thoughts employing these files is descriptive.³⁴ Even though individuation conditions and reference determination for a file is never determined simply by the entirety of the descriptive information stored in the file, this is consistent with some files being associated with a *privileged* piece of descriptive information, which plays the role of fixing their reference and determining their individuation conditions across time.³⁵ Therefore, by pointing to the idea that name-use comes along with the restructuring of thought into file-based thought, the functionalist has not explained how name-use enables previously unavailable singular thoughts. This is because it is consistent with the kind of restructuring she posits—restructuring into file-based thought—that the resulting thoughts are descriptive, not singular. Another way of putting this point is the following. By everyone's lights, mental files are means of mental organization, but what the functionalist fails to provide is an argument that, by *organizing* one's information in this way, one brings previously

³¹ This conception of files is in line with the recent account of mental files given in Recanati (2012).

³² Centrally, when information is co-filed, this allows for the thinker to presuppose the identity of the reference of this information. When information is stored in different files, this means an identity judgment is required if the thinker is to exploit facts about co-reference in her inferences. Thus, co-filing of information explains the possibility of inferences that 'trade on identity' (See Campbell 1987 for an explanation of this concept which is independent of the file-theoretic framework). Filing of information in *different* files explains Frege cases (See Recanati 2012 and Goodman 2016) for further explanation of the role of mental files).

³³ See Perry (1993) for elaboration of the role of files in accounting for continued belief.

³⁴ I lack space for a full account of descriptive files here but see Goodman (2016) for such an account.

³⁵ The claim here is not that all file-based thoughts are descriptive but rather that some are.

unavailable singular thoughts into being. The need for this argument is made pressing by the fact that the means of mental organization in question is consistent with descriptivism about the resulting thoughts.

Although my complaint against the functionalist doesn't depend on it, it is also worth noting that it is *plausible* that files associated with name-use are descriptive. Instead of giving a full account, I illustrate this by focusing on a particular feature of such files: the descriptive character of what we can think of as their *information-marshaling strategy*.³⁶ All files are associated with some procedure that determines which information can be rightfully added to the file—a procedure that, for any given piece of information, answers the question: *should this information be added to this file?* To see that the information-marshaling strategy associated with name-based files is plausibly descriptive rather than singular, we can think about the contrast between this kind of file and a file with a paradigmatically singular information-marshaling strategy: a perception based file.

In the case of a file based on a perceptual connection to an object, the thing that governs whether a piece of information properly enters the file is simply whether that information is accessed through the same continuing perceptual channel. In other words, in the case of perception-based file, the question of whether some given piece of information ought to be stored in the file does not go through cognition of a description, but is simply determined by an information-connection to the file's referent. Contrast the information-marshaling strategy in a case of testimony involving a name. Take the kind of pure testimony case that is relevant to us, and combine it with the functionalist's psychological story about what happens in cases of name-use. Because of the introduction of a name (either by me or to me in communication) I form a new file, and store any further information assumed to be about the same object in this file. Since the functionalist's story is one according to which descriptive thoughts are converted into singular thoughts by the initiation of a mental file, the functionalist accepts that, at the time of the initiation of the file, my way of conceptualizing the object is descriptive: the file's referent is either fixed with an arbitrary definite description (which is used to fix the referent of a descriptive name) or it is fixed by a metalinguistic description 'person called NN, who x is talking about'. The question is whether the initiation of the file itself converts a thought that is by everyone's lights descriptive into a singular thought. But, given the way the file is introduced, and given the stipulation that there is no *independent*, non-satisfactional means of picking the object out, it is plausible that, once the file is opened, what determines whether some given piece of information gets into the file is whether this information is taken to be about 'the Φ ' or about 'the person called NN that x is talking about'. That is, in this case, the question of whether some piece of information should be added to the file goes *through* the cognition of a description.³⁷ In this sense, the procedure for information-management is plausibly descriptive, where the procedure for a perception-based file is singular.

³⁶ A full account would focus also on the features mentioned in the previous paragraph: the reference determination and individuation story for name-based files.

³⁷ For discussion of the claim that name-based files are associated with descriptive information-marshaling procedures, and for citations of relevant psychological literature, see Gray (2016).

If we were looking at cases of name-use and asking, ‘*is it appropriate to theorise the thoughts in pure testimony cases as non-satisfactional mental states?*’, then we have seen that the mere fact that file-use occurs doesn’t give us reason to think we should. Even if it is *true* that names play a special functional role in thought—being associated with the use of mental files—this does not mean that the thoughts that go along with name-use are singular. In fact, there might be good reason to say some of these file-based thoughts are descriptive.

5.5 Taking stock

Where does our discussion of explanations of name-based singular thought leave us? If we stick with a fairly neutral definition of singular thought, there are reasons to think that existing explanations of the NBT thesis fall short of explaining *how* name-use enables one to think singular thoughts about the name’s referent. In this sense, the phenomenon of name-based singular thought remains mysterious. This does not in itself show there are no names-based singular thoughts, but it does motivate us to ask if a more satisfying package of views emerges by rejecting the NBT thesis. I claim it does.

6 Semantic content accessibility

We saw in Sect. 3 that the NBT thesis is not obligatory. It is not even obligatory if we are committed to Millianism about names. We can reject it by rejecting *content accessibility*. In this final part of the paper, I illustrate that, by accepting Millianism (at least for the purposes of argument) and adopting an expanded conception of what it takes to understand an utterance of a sentence containing a name, we avoid positing name-based singular thoughts we cannot explain and also provide a picture of communication which illuminates the nature of name-using practices.

The starting point for this strategy is to acknowledge that the datum that generates the NBT thesis is not in itself one about *singular thought*, but rather one about *understanding*. The NBT thesis looks compelling because there are pure testimony cases in which it seems plausible to say that understanding takes place. But, given the intuition that there is understanding in some pure testimony cases, the question we should ask is what understanding *requires* in these cases. In particular, does it require grasping the singular content that is semantically expressed by utterances of names?³⁸ I claim not.

Once we look more closely at pure testimony cases—cases in which there is no independent ability to think singular thoughts about the name’s referent—it is reasonable (in fact, even intuitive) to hold that understanding in such cases is a matter of

³⁸ Although I have emphasized that my strategy here is to accept a Millian semantics for names for the purposes of argument, it is worth reminding ourselves that, even if one prefers a predicativist semantics, many predicativists will hold that, in cases of referential uses, there will still be singular content expressed in context and, thus, the datum of understanding in pure testimony cases still produces a similar result. See Sect. 3 for discussion.

having two kinds of knowledge. First, on my view, it requires general knowledge of the way that the truth of sentences containing names depends on the referent of the name. Second, it requires that one generate and grasp a metalinguistic or metacommunicative descriptive content: something like, ‘the person called ‘Bruno’ whom x is talking about...’. In other words, in pure testimony cases, understanding is achieved by knowledge derived from linguistic competence with an expression *type* (perhaps along with some general categorial or sortal descriptive information).³⁹

It is possible to reconcile this conception of understanding for cases of name-use with the claim that an utterance of a sentence containing a name semantically expresses a singular content (and Sect. 3 of the paper outlines some of the reasons why we would want to do so). Here is the basic outline of a picture reconciling these views. For utterances of sentences containing referential uses of proper names, a singular content is *semantically expressed*. However, *if* the case is a pure testimony case, the hearer is unable to grasp this singular content. Understanding of the utterance is still possible, however, because such utterances also pragmatically *convey* a metalinguistic descriptive content: a sentence of the form, ‘Bruno is tall’ *conveys* ‘person called ‘Bruno’ who x is talking about is tall’.⁴⁰ One counts as understanding an utterance of, ‘Bruno is tall’ *either* by grasping the singular content it semantically expresses *or* by grasping the descriptive content pragmatically *conveyed*.⁴¹ Our expanded conception of understanding for utterances containing names allows that grasp of a *pragmatically* generated content is sufficient for understanding in a pure testimony case. The term ‘conveyed’ is used here to mark this fact.⁴²

In pursuing this strategy, it is true that we cannot avail ourselves of the very simplest picture of the relationship between language and thought. In the case of proper names, *understanding* allows for cases in which speaker, hearer, or both, are not able to grasp what is semantically expressed by an utterance of a sentence. The overall point is that, in some cases of name-use, communicative success is achieved because participants in the communication can grasp general contents, which are *conveyed* rather than *expressed*.

Let me further clarify this picture, and also illustrate its benefits, by answering two questions. First, what is the mechanism by which these conveyed meanings are

³⁹ In the example just given, the sortal/categorial *person* plays this role.

⁴⁰ As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, one might wonder at this stage why we would claim that the metalinguistic/metacommunicative descriptive content grasped here is *pragmatically conveyed* rather than, say, *presupposed* (as it would be according to a presuppositionalist account like Maier 2015 or Geurts Geurts 1997). The reason is dialectical: my argument is intended to show how we can and should reject the NBT thesis despite accepting Millianism about names. This aspect of the view could be altered if it turned out, for independent reasons, that some sort of presuppositional account of names was preferable to Millianism.

⁴¹ Note that, while the content conveyed here is descriptive with respect to *Bruno*, the way I have spelled it out here makes it singular with respect to one’s interlocutor (the content contains, ‘... who x is talking about’ where the x is an individual constant assigned to the interlocutor). Thus, communication with x may always involve a way of having singular thoughts about x , but I do not need to deny this to deny the NBT thesis.

⁴² It may be helpful to compare this position to that taken by Russell (1905, 1910, 1912). In footnote 14 I claimed that Russell (1910) comes close denying content accessibility (despite the fact that he is not clear about the distinction between content semantically expressed and content pragmatically conveyed). In the passage cited there, however, he also comes close to claiming that the knowledge enabling successful communication is *metalinguistic*: interlocutors describe a singular proposition about Bismarck.

generated and calculated? Second, why would agents systematically engage in the use of a linguistic device the semantic content of which cannot be grasped?

6.1 A non-Gricean pragmatic procedure

How do hearers generate the general, metalinguistic contents I have claimed are sufficient for understanding in pure testimony cases?

Such contents are generated by general knowledge about the truth-conditions of sentences containing names, in combination with a *non-Gricean procedure* that involves pragmatic modulation of the meaning of sub-sentential expressions.

When a name is used in a pure testimony case, by my lights, the semantic content of the name cannot be grasped. This means that a Gricean pragmatic procedure, by which pragmatic content is generated by an inference from the content semantically expressed, cannot be employed. But the fact that pragmatic calculations in pure testimony cases are not Gricean does not make them mysterious. On hearing a name the referent of which she has no independent knowledge, an agent will recognise that a singular term whose content she cannot grasp has been uttered.⁴³ On recognising that the term being used *is* a name, the agent modulates to a metalinguistic sub-sentential content ('person/object/place called 'NN' who *x* is talking about'), which in turn contributes compositionally to the meaning conveyed by the utterance as a whole.⁴⁴

To better understand what I have in mind, think of what takes place when a perceptual demonstrative is used but the hearer fails to grasp which object is being demonstrated (say, because her back is turned or she is looking the other way). Although the singular semantic content of the utterance is unavailable, a generally competent speaker will grasp *that* some object is being referred to, and she will grasp what is being predicated of that object. A pure testimony case involving a name is like this in that the singular content expressed is not grasped, but a related general content, which is pragmatically generated and calculated, is grasped. In the pure testimony case, the hearer infers *that* an object bearing that name is being referred to. The result is that something like a metalinguistic predicate ('the *x* called 'NN'') is generated pragmatically.⁴⁵

We can also better understand what is distinctive about pure testimony cases with names by thinking about the way in which they *differ* from many cases in which a

⁴³ Thus, recognition that the name *is* a name is required. This is the sense in which understanding requires general knowledge of the way that the truth of sentence containing a name depends on the referent of the name.

⁴⁴ For a similar picture of pragmatic modulation, see Recanati (2004), p. 131.

⁴⁵ I've heard the following question raised: If we adopt a Kaplanian account of demonstratives, we will think that what is being grasped in the perceptual demonstrative case is the *linguistic meaning*, or *character* of the demonstrative. Am I claiming that pure testimony cases involve grasping the character of names, without grasping their content? Wouldn't this be at odds with the claim that names are Millian? I'm not sure it would, but I'll leave the issue aside. I do not need to commit to the view that what we are grasping in pure testimony cases is the 'character' of a name. What I have claimed instead is that we generate a metalinguistic predicative content by means of a general inference. This is not at odds with Millianism about names.

perceptual demonstrative is used, but the hearer is unable to grasp the singular content expressed. Arguably, in most communications involving a perceptual demonstrative, it is a requirement on understanding that one grasp the content expressed by the utterance—that is, that one identifies the object referred to by the perceptual demonstrative.⁴⁶ In such cases, one must identify the object of reference in order to fulfill the *point* of the utterance.⁴⁷ It is (most often) simply inappropriate to try to communicate by using a perceptual demonstrative if your interlocutor is not in a position to identify the object to which you are referring. This is arguably, frequently not the case with proper names. The frequency with which successful communication is achieved in pure testimony cases involving names serves to underscore this difference. Communication often runs smoothly in these cases, even though their essential feature is that the hearer (and perhaps sometimes the speaker too) has no independent means to identify the object being discussed.⁴⁸ In the case we discussed in Sect. 2, in which you tell me about your friend Bruno, you may be quite *aware* that I'm not personally acquainted with Bruno, and that I don't know who he is or anything about him. But, this doesn't stop you from using his name.⁴⁹ This is an indication that the *point* of our conversation can be fulfilled—that is, the communicative exchange can serve its purpose—through me ascertaining that we are talking about 'someone named 'Bruno' who *x* is talking about'.

That these kinds of cases, where communication involving a name succeeds despite the fact that the semantic content expressed cannot be grasped, often occur does not mean there are no cases where communication involving a name *fails* because the singular content semantically expressed is not grasped. There may also be particular cases where identification of the referent of a name *is* necessary to fulfill the point of an utterance containing a name. For example, there are cases where there is a *presupposition* that both interlocutors are acquainted with the person being mentioned by name, or a presupposition that both know a good deal about him. In such cases, the

⁴⁶ See Campbell (2002) for an account of singular thought that relies on this intuition.

⁴⁷ I am not claiming there are *no* cases in which a perceptual demonstrative is used in a way such that the point of the utterance could be fulfilled despite the hearer not grasping the singular content expressed. For example, consider a case in which I am facing away from someone who is poised to attack me and you yell, 'He's coming for you!' in order to warn me of the attack. In such a case, the point of the utterance is arguably to let me know that *someone* is coming for me. I can allow for such cases, while still claiming that, on balance, there is a difference between the use of names and the use of demonstratives in this respect. My claim is that cases of this form, where the point of the utterance is fulfilled despite lack of availability of the singular content expressed, are more common with names than with perceptual demonstratives. The fact that successful communication in pure testimony cases is common attests to this.

⁴⁸ There will perhaps be *fewer* cases in which both speaker and hearer have no independent grip on the referent of a name being used in communication since, if none of the conversants have an independent grip on the object of communication, there will be less point in communicating about it.

⁴⁹ Cases like this clearly arise despite the point I acknowledged in Sect. 2, that it might sometimes be infelicitous to refer to someone by name when one is aware that one's interlocutor does not know the person in question. In such cases, speakers often provide some contextualizing information to go along with the name (for e.g. 'My friend Bruno is...', 'Bruno, an old friend of mine, is...', 'I have a friend, Bruno, who...'). But, this actually serves to bolster my claims about how we manage to communicate with and understand names in such cases. It points to the fact that communication succeeds by way of speakers signaling to their interlocutors what *kind* of object or person is being discussed because they know their interlocutors will be engaged in the process of building a descriptive identification of the name's referent.

point of the utterance might be more like that of the standard perceptual demonstrative: it involves getting one's interlocutor to think of a particular object, in a particular way.

It is, however, worth *reemphasizing* the following point. To the extent that one wants to *resist* the claim that communication can succeed in pure testimony cases involving name-use, this does not stand as an objection to the view I have proposed. Rather, since the intuition that communication can succeed in pure testimony cases is in fact what gets the NBT thesis off the ground in the first place, rejecting it merely gives us a more basic reason to reject it.

Finally, it may at this point be helpful to draw a comparison between the view defended here and certain aspects of the account of assertion defended by Stalnaker (1978). As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, there are similarities between the views that warrant this comparison. On Stalnaker's view, there are contexts (for example, utterances of identity statements or negative existential statements) in which communication is facilitated by *diagonalization*, the operation by which one moves from the *horizontal proposition* expressed (uptake of which would not have an appropriate effect on the context set) to the *diagonal proposition*, which is a metalinguistic proposition.

I do not wish to entirely resist the suggestion that my view of how communication is facilitated in pure testimony cases is similar to Stalnaker's theory of diagonalization. To the extent that the views are similar, one contribution of the current paper may be to bring a Stalnakerian set of ideas about how speakers and hearers negotiate communicative success into contact with issues in the singular thought literature and show how those ideas can be of use in resolving disputes in that literature. However, the assimilation of my view to Stalnaker's picture is not straightforward, for several reasons.

Firstly, while both views involve communication via the generation of metalinguistic content, Stalnaker (1978) applies this kind of process in different cases, in a different way, for different reasons and with different theoretical presuppositions. Stalnaker applies diagonalization to contexts involving identity statements and negative existential statements, whereas the pragmatic process posited here is applied in pure testimony cases. It is also unclear whether and how Stalnaker's framework should be applied to my cases. Stalnaker presupposes a course-grained possible worlds view of content, whereas it is central to the current paper to presuppose a structured picture of content.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the process posited here is applied sub-sententially, this being essential for reasons discussed in the current section of the paper. Finally, my view maintains a sharp distinction between what is *semantically expressed* by an utterance containing a name and what is *pragmatically conveyed* by such an utterance, whereas Stalnaker's general picture of assertion is pragmatic. On Stalnaker's view, in cases where diagonalization is required, it cannot be the assertoric *point* of the utterance to communicate the horizontal proposition: the reason diagonalization is applied in the first place is that the horizontal proposition is not felicitous. However, on my view, there is nothing *infelicitous* about the singular content semantically expressed by an utterance containing a name (even in a pure testimony case)—it is rather simply that

⁵⁰ See footnote 1 for discussion of this presupposition.

some hearers are not in a position to grasp that content but can nonetheless communicate using the name by grasping the descriptive metalinguistic/metacommunicative content pragmatically conveyed (I take up the question of why utterances of names in pure testimony cases semantically express singular content in the next section of the paper).

6.2 The structure of name-using practices

A second question about my view concerns ‘wasted’ semantic content. It is an implication of giving up *semantic content accessibility* that name-use often involves a systematic ‘wasting’ of semantic content, since successful communication can take place without grasp of the content semantically expressed by an utterance of a name. But, if a name semantically expresses singular content that one need not grasp in order to understand an utterance containing it, why do we use these devices? Why use a device whose semantic content need not be grasped?

Rather than representing a problem, however, I think the fact that we can use names in contexts where their semantic content isn’t grasped points to an important feature of name-using practices. Here, I have in mind a picture of name-using practices defended by Evans (1982), according to which name-using practices have an *asymmetric two-tier structure*, which comes with two ways to participate in the practice.

The two-tier structure of a name-using practice is that there are what Evans calls *producers* of the name, and also *consumers* of the name. The purpose of a proper name—that for which it exists in the language—is to label an object, such that we have an easy way to keep track of it, across conversational contexts. In this sense, names are not ‘one-off’ devices of reference like demonstratives or indexicals, but rather devices that carry their semantic content through variations in context. By using a name, we track an object by virtue of a shared convention of using that name to refer to a particular thing across different contexts. What it is for such a convention to succeed is that there is a systematic practice in place whereby the name ‘Bruno’ is consistently taken to pick out Bruno, the name ‘Belinda’ is consistently taken to pick out Belinda, and so forth. This convention is anchored by the judgments of speakers who can identify the referents of proper names *as* the referents of those names. These speakers are what Evans (1982, Chap. 11) calls the ‘producers’ of a name-using practice. Producers have the ability to think singular thoughts about the name’s referent and also have knowledge of the referent of the name *as such*—they not only know the object, they know it by name.⁵¹ This means producers in a name-using practice are able to grasp the singular contents semantically expressed by utterances of sentences containing the name. Crucially, however, the producers’ ability to entertain singular thoughts about the referent of a name and their knowledge of the referent *as such* is what explains their grasp of the semantic content expressed by utterances of sentences containing names, not the other way around. In a sense that will admittedly

⁵¹ You may become a producer not just by an act of baptism or the observation of an act of baptism, but also by introduction (‘This is NN’) or by observing the practice (‘Look, now NN has the ball!’). In these ways, producers can introduce other speakers into the practice as producers. (See, Evans 1982, pp. 376–377).

require some delicacy to spell out, the name-using practice relies on the past or present judgments of producers.⁵² These judgments are what anchor the convention of using *this name* to refer to *this thing*—that is, they connect the name to its referent.

But, being a producer is not the only way to participate in a name-using practice. You can also be what Evans calls a *consumer* of the name. A consumer is someone who can successfully communicate using the name without grasping the semantic content expressed by it.⁵³ Our practice of talking about objects we have little independent knowledge of, means that our uses of these devices are sometimes parasitic. As competent general reasoners with general knowledge of the way that a name contributes to the semantic content expressed by a sentence containing it, we are able to employ the name to pragmatically convey and grasp general contents about the name's referent.⁵⁴

How does this two-tier structure explain the wasted semantic content involved in pure testimony cases on my view? When you use a name to communicate about an object, you take part in a practice for which there are *in principle* producers.⁵⁵ We can see what this means by noting the contrast with definite descriptions. A definite description refers to an object (at a world) in virtue of a match with the object's properties. Its role as a term tracking the object thus standardly cannot persist through changes in these properties.⁵⁶ Say Ralph is the actual shortest spy in the world. 'The shortest spy' will no longer pick out Ralph tomorrow if someone shorter becomes a spy. As we know, names are different. A name, once introduced, picks out an object regardless of its occupation, height, hair color, etc. So, where the success of a definite description in tracking a particular object relies directly on a relation of *satisfaction* between it and its object, successful reference using a name does not. Instead, it relies on the term's use staying in line with the judgments of its producers. The name's semantic value relies on the coherence of a convention. The producers, as Evans (1982, p. 378) puts it, are speakers who have knowledge of this convention: they know to whom the name refers. This is why the device carries with it, into every context of use, a semantic content that some users cannot grasp. It is important that this content

⁵² There is delicacy in part because we do not want to rule out well-functioning practices in which all the producers have died, for example. We may also wish to make space for special practices that lack producers, such as practices for descriptive names. See also footnotes 55 and 57 for further discussion of reasons why the reliance of the practice on the judgments of producers requires delicacy to spell out.

⁵³ Consumers can act as both speakers and hearers in communications involving the name. The term 'consumer' should not be understood to entail that consumers in a name-using practice can only *receive* testimony involving the name. The mark of a consumer in the practice is that she can only grasp the content pragmatically conveyed by uses of the name (including her own uses), not the content semantically expressed by it.

⁵⁴ It's worth noting that the pragmatic picture of communication given in Sect. 6.1, according to which conveyed contents are generated via a non-gricean procedure triggered by general knowledge of the way that names contribute semantically to the truth-conditions of utterances containing them is not found in Evans (1982). What I take from Evans is the claim that name-using practices have a two-tier structure, and the producer/consumer distinction.

⁵⁵ As we know, the producers may disappear at some point, and the names can remain meaningful. This happens most obviously in cases of people whose lives are well documented for historical purposes. It's worth noting that, in a case where the producers of a name have all disappeared and there is little documentation of the name's referent, the reference of the name is in fact less secure.

⁵⁶ Unless the description is rigidified, or indexed to a particular time, that is.

is made *available*, even if it is often wasted, because this is what provides a means by which the practice is made accountable to the potential judgments of semantic producers, which are what anchor the term to its referent.

There may be reservations about the claim that the semantic content of a name is determined by the judgments of producers in the name-using practice. However, this claim can be defended by thinking about what happens when the judgments of producers shift to identify a new object as the referent of a name. Evans outlined such cases and discussed their implications. He asks us to imagine a mature name-using practice in which the semantic producers of the practice ‘regularly and reliably recognise an individual, x , as NN’ (Evans 1982, p. 388). Suppose, in such a case, that x ‘disappears from the scene’, but that the producers begin to misidentify a different individual, y , as NN. Although this starts out as a *mistake* on the part of the producers, it eventually results in the name shifting its referent.⁵⁷ At some point it will be right to say that a new practice is established of recognising y as NN. At this point, it must be conceded that ‘NN’ refers to y , not x .⁵⁸ This demonstrates that the judgments of producers determine and sustain the reference of a name. The potential for the judgments of producers to either sustain or change the referential properties of a name is an important part of a name-using practice.

7 Conclusion

Overall, by giving up semantic content accessibility and adopting an expanded conception of understanding for utterances containing names, we adopt a picture that better reflects the structure of name-using practices and the different possible ways speakers can participate in such practices, and communicate with names.

In case the view of communication I have been defending here should seem revisionary, it is worth emphasizing that central features of my view are in fact standard for Millians about names (recall, the dialectic of this paper takes place within the scope of the assumption that Millianism is correct, so this comparison is important). On my picture, like other Millian pictures, the semantic content of a name is not identical with the content that is trafficked in cases of successful communication with the name. For example, Soames (2005) claims that what is asserted by the use of a name is not identical with the singular semantic content expressed by the name.⁵⁹ On Soames’s view, what is asserted includes descriptive content that is not part of the semantic content of the name. On the picture I have proposed, the role for the semantic content of the name is different from the role of semantic content for Soames, but on both views there is a gap between semantic content and communicative content. On the standard Millian story, the role of the semantic content of a name is that it is what is *shared* among

⁵⁷ The case therefore also illustrates why, even setting aside cases of practices with no producers, some delicacy is required in spelling out the sense in which the semantic value of a name is dependent on the judgments of producers.

⁵⁸ The ‘Madagascar’ example in Evans (1985) is similar in illustrating the way that a name’s referent is connected to the judgments of users of the name, although he had not yet introduced the producer/consumer distinction at this point in time.

⁵⁹ See also Soames (2002).

cases that involve variations in descriptive information associated with the name. On my story, the semantic content is what is shared by *producers* in the name-using practice, and the *role* of semantic content is to make accessible producer content, which anchors the practice. To count as understanding, one needs to take part in the practice successfully, but one doesn't need to be a producer. Consumers can participate in the practice too. Thus, the picture I have defended here does not introduce complications to an account of communication that are foreign, from a Millian perspective.

As I've emphasized throughout the paper, my strategy has been to show that, even if one adopts a Millian semantics for names, there is reason to reject the NBT thesis. But, once we've seen the benefit of rejecting the NBT thesis from within the Millian framework, it's worth noting that the kinds of arguments I've given against the NBT thesis can be applied outside this framework. If one prefers a predicativist semantics for names but admits that referential uses of names express singular content in context, the NBT thesis will potentially still seem compelling. However, the points I have made against the NBT thesis will still stand, as well as the general point that, by rejecting semantic content accessibility, we yield a better picture of communication and name-using practices.

Overall, I hope to have illustrated that rejecting the NBT thesis turns out not to be a cost, but an overall benefit. Despite the popularity of the NBT thesis, the literature has not in fact offered us a convincing explanation of the phenomenon of name-based singular thought. I have suggested that, instead of positing a phenomenon we are not in a position to explain, it is worth reflecting on the picture that emerges when we deny that there are name-based singular thoughts. Section 6 of the paper illustrated that this picture supplies a satisfying account of the epistemic position in which one stands to objects named in a pure testimony case (that of constructing a metalinguistic/metacommunicative descriptive thought about such an object) and also supplies an account of understanding and communication that reflects of the structure of name-using practices.

Acknowledgments Thanks to Jason Bridges, Aidan Gray, John Hawthorne, Robin Jeshion, Michael Kremer, and Josef Stern for discussion, as well as to an audience at PLUK (Philosophy of Language in the UK) 2014. The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) / ERC Grant Agreement n. 312938.

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