

Acquaintance and First Person Attitude Reports

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Abstract It is often assumed that singular thought requires that an agent be epistemically acquainted with the object the thought is about. However, it can sometimes truthfully be said of someone that they have a belief about an object, despite not being interestingly epistemically acquainted with that object. In defense of an epistemic acquaintance constraint on singular thought, it is thus often claimed that belief ascriptions are context-sensitive, and do not always track the contents of an agent's mental states. This paper uses first-person attitude reports to argue that contextualism about belief ascriptions does not present an adequate defense of an acquaintance constraint on singular thought.

Keywords: singular thought, attitude ascriptions, content, acquaintance

1 Ascriptions of Singular Thoughts

Singular thoughts are mental states that are directly about objects; this means that the contents of these thoughts do not include descriptive information that mediates between the agent and the object the thought is about. Singular thoughts are thus typically thought of as relations between agents and *singular contents*: proposi-

tions which constitutively involve the object they are about.¹ The following sort of *epistemic constraint* on singular thought is often assumed:

(1) Epistemic Constraint

“In order for a subject *s* to think a singular thought about an object *o*, *s* must bear a special epistemic/cognitive relation to *o*” (Goodman 2017: 3).

This ‘epistemic/cognitive’ relation might be a very direct form of acquaintance (Russell 1912), demonstrative acquaintance (Evans 1982), or some sort of representational (Bach 1987) or informational (Sawyer 2012) causal chain. Conversely, having only *descriptive* information about an object licenses general thoughts (mental states with general contents).

Another assumption that philosophers have often made is that attitude ascriptions are a good guide to the content an agent *entertains* in having the ascribed thought, where entertaining is “the relation you bear to a content when that content is appropriately assigned to your mental-state” (Goodman 2017: 6). This assumption, which Hawthorne & Manley (2012) call *harmony* is stated as follows:²

(2) Harmony

“Any belief report whose complement clause contains either a singular term or a variable bound from the outside by an existential quantifier requires

1 I set aside the following issues about singular contents: the first is whether or not they are object-dependent, the second is whether or not they contain objects or just concepts relating to objects, the third is whether or not the contents of thoughts are structured or unstructured .

2 These two assumptions (the epistemic constraint and harmony) make up what Goodman calls the *traditional picture* of singular thought, which she attributes to Evans (1982), McDowell (1984), Russell (1912), Recanati (1993).

for its truth that the subject believe a singular proposition” (Hawthorne & Manley 2012: 38).

It is also widely assumed that believing a singular proposition is sufficient for having a singular thought.³ Harmony, combined with this further assumption, comprise what Goodman calls the *tracking-assumption*: the claim that a true ascription of a belief relating an agent to a singular proposition entails that the subject of that ascription has a singular thought.

Conflict arises because it is possible to come up with cases where an ascription of a singular thought is true, but no plausible epistemic constraint is met, and an agent the thought is being ascribed to has only descriptive information.⁴ Consider the following example:⁵

A wealthy, irresponsible acquaintance of ours isn't present for his child's birth. Egomaniac that he is, he insists on naming the child in absentia ('The child will be called "John" '). Lucy is told about

3 Hawthorne & Manley (2012) call this 'sufficiency'.

4 I will focus on attitude ascriptions which relate agents to 'that'-clauses expressing singular contents, such that the singular content appears to be in the de dicto position of the relation. Typically, these are that-clauses with referring expressions (like names or demonstratives) in the subject position.

5 Goodman's example is a recent recent example of cases where names are associated with descriptive beliefs. Kaplan (1968), for instance, gives the example of 'Newman 1', which is the name given to whoever happens to be the first baby born in the 22nd century. We can talk about and ascribe beliefs about Newman 1. cases of this kind support Goodman's (and later my own) case, but they are importantly different, in ways that might open them to additional criticism. The names in such examples are fixed by a description: this might be the meaning of the name. In mine, and Goodman's, case, the names are fixed in a normal way.

this and forms a belief, which could be truly reported with... ‘Lucy believes that John will one day inherit a great deal of money’.

(Goodman 2017: 11)

This conflict has led some to reject the epistemic constraint in favor of a position called *liberalism*, which is the view that there are no non-semantic constraints on singular thought (Hawthorne & Manley 2012). Others have simply rejected the claim that we should theorize from attitude ascriptions to the metaphysics of mental states, either by rejecting Harmony specifically or the notion of a tracking assumption in general (Recanati 2012).

Several philosophers have taken a more nuanced position in defense of the epistemic constraint. I will call this position *contextualism*:⁶

Contextualism

Attitude ascriptions do track a relation between agents and contents, but attitude verbs like ‘believes’ track different relations in different contexts, and do not always track the relation of entertaining.

Contextualism can explain why agents can sometimes be truthfully ascribed with singular thoughts about objects that they only have descriptive information about. Thus, the epistemic constraint is not in conflict with the behavior of our attitude ascriptions after all.

⁶ Contextualism is defended by Bach (1987, 1997), Goodman (2017), Lepore & Stone (2014), Stojanovic (2012), among others. The details of the specific positions defended by each of these individuals differ. This paper focuses specifically on the version of contextualism defended by Bach and Goodman; however, most of the points made in this paper are broad enough to apply to contextualism in general.

In what follows, I argue that even taking a contextualist proposal for granted, we can still get the above sorts of counterexamples to the epistemic constraint. In § 2 I present the version of contextualism that I take Bach (1997), Goodman (2017), and other proponents of acquaintance to endorse. In § 3 I present cases where an agent who has only descriptive information about an object is able to truthfully ascribe *herself* with a singular thought about an object, but where the contextualist position alone does not give us room to deny that she entertains a thought about that object.

2 Contextualism

Emily is told, and comes to believe, that the 44th president of the United States is left handed. She is told this in exactly these terms, and knows nothing else about the president. Just that whoever he is, he is left handed

We might represent Emily's belief in terms of her having the following general thought about the 44th president of the United States.⁷

(3) Emily believes $\exists x[44\text{th president } (x) \& (\forall y)(44\text{th president } (y) \rightarrow (x = y)) \& \text{left handed } (x)]$

We can also imagine that Emily has this belief without having any idea that the 44th president of the United States is Barack Obama (who she has never seen, nor heard of by name). In other words, (3) is true without Emily having any singular thoughts about Obama (she does not entertain any singular contents with Barack Obama as a constituent).

But if we know that Barack Obama is the unique denotation of the definite description 'the 44th president of the United States', then from *our* point of view

⁷ General thoughts are those with a quantifier in the de dicto position of the attitude.

Emily bears some relation to singular contents with Barack Obama as a constituent. She has a belief in a content which *we* know is extensionally equivalent to a content about Barack Obama. Because the 44th President of the United States is Barack Obama — and because we know this — it is possible for us to say that Emily has thoughts which are, in some sense, about Barack Obama. Further, if today Barack Obama is wearing a yellow tie, then Emily also has thoughts which are about someone in a yellow tie. Emily is related, in some sense, to the following two contents; one singular:

(4) left handed (*a*)⁸

and one general:

(5) $\exists x$ [wearing a yellow tie (*x*) & left handed (*x*)]

But this does not mean that either of the above contents plays any role in Emily's thoughts (as far as a theory of mind is concerned). These are not contents that she entertains. Yet it may seem perfectly natural to report on Emily's thoughts as follows:

(6) Emily believes that Obama is left handed.

(7) Emily believes that someone wearing a yellow tie is left handed.

What the contextualist proposes is going on is that when we use attitude verbs like 'believes', 'thinks', and 'knows' we sometimes track relations between agents and contents which are not the relation of entertaining, but are more like the relations between Emily and the contents in (6) and (7). In certain contexts, the scope of the

⁸ *a* is an individual constant which contributes Obama to the content.

attitude verb expands beyond tracking a cognitive relation in order to track whatever relation is relevant to the speaker's communicative aims. Thus, the relation that gets expressed by an attitude verb like 'believes' is sensitive to facts about what will best facilitate mutual understanding.

Attitude ascriptions *do* track a relation that an agent bears to a content, just not the basic cognitive relation of entertaining a content which is fundamental to our having thoughts with particular contents. Returning to Goodman's example from the last section: when I say 'Lucy believes that John will one day inherit a great deal of money', this is not made true by a direct cognitive relation between Lucy and a singular proposition about John. Goodman explains this as follows:

[G]iven features of a context, there may be a need to state Lucy's belief in a way that in fact tracks the particular way a speaker, her audience or both think about the object of Lucy's belief. Both these factors often introduce a gap between the content Lucy entertains (in my sense) and the content she is truly said to believe. In short, believing that P is not always entertaining that P.

(Goodman 2017: 19-20)

It is context-sensitive which relation an attitude ascription specifies. It is possible that 's believes that p' is true without the content expressed by 'p' being the content s entertains.

3 First-Person Attitude Reports

Adopting a context-sensitive account of the relation expressed by 'believes' (and other doxastic attitude verbs / speech report verbs) does not settle the question of

whether attitude ascriptions are *sometimes* a good guide to the content an agent entertains.⁹ In other words, the question of whether we should adopt a weakened version of the tracking assumption, which holds that *in certain contexts*, if a true attitude ascription relates an agent S to a singular proposition, then S entertains a singular thought.

Goodman, at least, acknowledges that this is an open question, and notes that a conversation in which speakers are explicitly told to list one another's entertained thoughts is a possibility for such a context. I wish to focus on another plausible candidate for such cases: these are cases of what I will call *first-person attitude reports*, where an agent ascribes a thought to herself. For example, if Lucy were to say

(8) I believe that Tony broke into the house.

(9) I think that the blond guy from our chemistry class is a drug dealer.

these would be first-person attitude reports (of Lucy's). There are several reasons for taking first-person attitude reports to track the relation of entertaining that an agent bears to a content, rather than some more general relation (such as is the case with many third-person attitude reports). In other words: there are reasons for thinking that first-person attitude reports produce the kind of context in which ascriptions of singular thoughts can only be true if an agent has a singular thought.

First, note how implausible it is that someone could intentionally give a true report of her own attitudes without actually entertaining the content she reports herself as believing, thinking, or knowing. How could I truly and meaningfully utter

⁹ The same goes for indirect speech reports.

(10) I believe that Bryce has a dog.

without the content expressed by ‘Bryce has a dog’ being a content I am entertaining?¹⁰

Unless contextualists hope to appeal to a rather mysterious notion of entertaining a thought — one on which we somehow have access to thoughts that we do not entertain when we introspect and report on our thoughts — it seems as though I should be taken to entertain any content I report myself as believing (as long as this report is truthful). If I can intentionally produce a true report of a belief that P, then P must be among the contents I entertain in having that belief.¹¹ If I do not entertain it, then what could possibly explain how it fits into my mental life such that it is a content I can truthfully attribute myself as thinking?

A second, related reason for taking first-person attitude reports to track the contents that agents directly entertain has to do with the nature of proposed contextualist accounts of attitude ascriptions. Imagine that Tony, the guy from my chemistry class, breaks into Lucy’s house to steal her lucky study amulet. I tell Lucy ‘the guy from

¹⁰ We can distinguish the kinds of meaningful utterances under discussion here from cases where a speaker merely has it on testimony that a certain indicative sentence expresses a true proposition, and despite not understanding the proposition expressed by that sentence, believes that the sentence is true (thanks to NAMES REDACTED for suggesting that I make this distinction explicit). The cases that I will focus on do not have this kind of testimonial feature.

¹¹ There may be an important distinction here between first-person attitude reports where a belief is self-reported, and cases in which the belief is, in some sense, ‘self attributed’. For instance, consider an example where an individual with a poor memory finds evidence (perhaps a note she left for herself) that they have some belief that p (thanks to an editor from *Analysis* for suggesting an example along these lines). In such a case, we might want to resist the claim that the speaker has a belief with the content in question; the cases I am interested in are specifically those in which a speaker is giving a report of her mental state.

my chemistry class broke into your house', and she believes me. I may report Lucy's belief to you in the following way:

(11) Lucy thinks Tony broke into her house.

and this could be true even if Lucy has no idea that 'Tony' is the name of the guy in my chemistry class, and all she knows about Tony is that he is someone who I take chemistry with. According to contextualists like Bach and Goodman, the reason that 'believes' covers a relation of non-entertaining in this context is that I might expect you to understand (11) better than (12) if you know Tony by name, but not by the definite description 'the guy from my chemistry class':

(12) Lucy thinks the guy from our chemistry class broke into her house.

We have two contents, the first singular and the other general:

(13) broke into Lucy's house (a)¹²

(14) $\exists x$ [guy from our chemistry class (x) & ($\forall y$)(guy from our chemistry class (y) \rightarrow ($x = y$)) & broke into Lucy's house (x)]

Lucy entertains (14) but not (13); but only (13) is appropriate for my ascription of Lucy's belief in the context of *our* conversation. If Lucy were reporting on her own belief, such a report would obviously be constrained by what will make sense to Lucy in that context. So: how could a content both (a) make sense to Lucy as the content of her belief, such that it is something she could understand herself as believing in a conversational context, and (b) somehow fail to be a content that she

¹² Where a is a constant contributing Tony.

entertains in having the belief? If the reason for thinking that attitude verbs express different relations in different contexts has to do with what will be understandable in that context, then Lucy should only be able to report herself as having attitudes whose contents she understands. If Lucy understands herself as bearing an attitude toward a content, then she must entertain that content.

In what follows I argue that agents can issue first-person attitude reports relating themselves to singular contents while only having descriptive information about an object. In other words, the conflict that arises between the epistemic constraint and the tracking assumption also arises between the epistemic constraint and the weakened version of the tracking assumption.

Here is an example, based on one found in Goodman's paper:¹³ Imagine that you tell me that someone is coming over at 11am to repair the air conditioner. Neither of us has ever met this person; you give me the following two pieces of descriptive information:

- i. that everyone who works for this particular air conditioning repair company is called "Carol"
- ii. that she will ring the doorbell at exactly 10:55.

Now suppose that 10:55 rolls around and I hear the doorbell ring. I come into the kitchen to get you and I say

(15) I think that Carol is here.

There is very little here that seems to acquaint me with Carol beyond descriptive information; it is implausible that I satisfy even a very loose conception of the

¹³ Thanks to NAMES REDACTED for some helpful suggestions on how best to formulate this case.

Epistemic Constraint. I have truthfully reported myself as bearing the belief relation to the content that Carol is here. Since the sentence ‘Carol is here’ expresses a singular content

(16) is here (*a*)

and since first-person attitude reports relate agents to the contents of their thoughts, I express is a singular thought in uttering (15). In other words, it must be the case that I entertain the singular content in (16). But it is clearly the case that I only have descriptive information about Carol.¹⁴

So even if we accept the contextualist claim about attitude verbs, we can see that it is possible to construct cases where a speaker ascribes an attitude to someone (namely, herself) such that we ought to take the content of the ascription to be the content that the agent entertains. Further, some of these cases will include ascriptions of thoughts about singular contents which are true in virtue of an agent having only descriptive information about an object.

4 Concluding Remarks

Perhaps one way the epistemic constraint can be salvaged is by carefully considering the default semantic role of names and demonstratives. Should we abandon the notion that names typically make an objectual contribution to the content expressed by an utterance?¹⁵ Or perhaps we might hold that in certain, epistemically deficient contexts, names (and demonstrative pronouns) express descriptive contents.

¹⁴ The case could also be built with a demonstrative pronoun. I may as well have said “I think she’s here” instead of (15).

¹⁵ Predicativists about names, for example, endorse this claim (Fara 2015).

If there are contexts in which typical singular terms can express non-singular contents, then we might think that agents can self-report on thoughts using singular terms, and accurately represent the proposition they entertain as a non-singular one. While I think this line is promising, I offer this merely as a suggestion. An explanation is needed for the incompatibility between the epistemic constraint and the behavior of attitude ascriptions; perhaps it is to be found in the semantics for the sentences which appear in the ‘that’-clauses of those ascriptions themselves.

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