Singular Thought
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The Singularity of Singular Thought

A singular thought can be characterized as a thought which is directed at just one object. The term 'thought' can apply to episodes of thinking, or to the content of the episode (what is thought). This paper argues that episodes of thinking can be just as singular, in the above sense, when they are directed at things that do not exist as when they are directed at things that do exist. In this sense, then, singular thoughts are not object-dependent.

I

Singular Terms and Singular Thought. In *Word and Object*, Quine contrasts general and singular terms, and defines a general term as one which is 'true of each, severally, of any number of objects' (1960, pp. 90–1). But as he goes on to point out, the number of objects in question is not what really matters to the singular–general contrast: 'natural satellite of the earth' is a general term though true of just one object. What matters is rather that a singular term is one that 'purports to refer to just one object' (1960, p. 96). The dictionary defines 'to purport' as 'to appear or claim to be or do something, especially falsely'. Putting this definition together with Quine's, we can say that a singular term is one that (as it were) appears or 'claims' to be doing something—referring to just one object—and still appears or 'claims' to be doing such a thing even if it is false that it is doing it: that is, even if there is no one object it refers to.

Purporting, of course, is a metaphor: words do not literally purport (or claim) to do anything. Quine says that 'such talk of purport is only a picturesque way of alluding to distinctive grammatical roles that singular and general terms play in sentences. It is by grammatical role that general and singular terms are properly to be distinguished' (1960, p. 96). But the significance of the word 'purport' remains: a term can have the grammatical role of a singular term even if it fails to refer to just one object.

It is widely accepted that just as there are general and singular terms, there are general and singular *thoughts*.[1] Following Quine's remarks, we can say that a singular thought is one that purports to refer to just one object. Preserving the connotations of 'purport', then we can say in addition that such a thought can do this even if there is no such object, and therefore no such reference. Now, like words, thoughts do not literally purport or claim anything. But just as we can spell out the metaphor of a term's purporting in terms of its grammatical role, so it is natural to spell out the idea of a singular thought 'purporting to refer' in terms of its *cognitive* role. And if we take the connotations of 'purporting' seriously, then a thought can be singular even if it fails to refer to just one object, so long as it has the cognitive role associated with thoughts that succeed in so referring.

The word 'thought' can be used to refer both to *episodes* of thinking and to the *content* of such an episode—where the content is *what* is thought (or judged, hoped for, imagined, etc.). Frege (1920) used the word *Gedanke* (thought) in this latter way, and it also makes sense in English to say that someone is expressing, or understanding, or trying to grasp a thought. This is 'thought' in the sense of *content of thought*. The content of a thought is normally taken to be a proposition—that is, something assessable as true or false—and that is how I shall understand it here.[2] There is a sense, then, in which propositions are thoughts. But it is also correct to use the term 'thought' for the episode of thinking something—if I talk about a thought that I had yesterday, then I am talking about an episode, since only they (rather than their contents) can have temporal location. In this sense, judgements themselves are thoughts, and their contents are propositions.

So if we want to talk about a thought's 'purporting to refer' we could mean that a psychological *episode* is so purporting, or that the propositional *content* is. But if we want to spell out 'purporting' in terms of the cognitive role of thoughts, then it is more natural to think that episodes of thinking purport to refer, rather than propositions. Propositions, conceived of as abstract contents of psychological acts, do not have cognitive roles as such; it is rather acts of thinking which have such roles.

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[1] An important recent collection is Jeshion (2010*b*).

[2] There are good reasons for treating the contents of some thoughts as non-propositional, but these are not relevant to this debate. See Crane (2001, ch. 1).

What is the cognitive role of a singular thought episode? As Quine observed about singular terms, the issue is not whether the thought happens to alight on just one object, but rather whether there is some particular object that the thinker is *aiming* at when thinking, whether they have someone particular *in mind*. Noticing my wallet missing, I might think *someone stole my wallet*. I do not have any particular person in mind, and the content of my thought could be made true by the fact that a team of pickpockets staged the theft together. But if I see a man leaving the table acting suspiciously, then when I think *that man stole my wallet*, I am 'aiming' in thought at just one object. The second thought, but not the first, is a singular thought in the sense that will concern me here. The distinction between singular and general thought—the distinction between having some particular object in mind and thinking about the world without having any particular object in mind—is fundamental to our mental lives, and any adequate theory of mind must make room for it.

My purpose here is to sketch a conception of singular thought which makes sense of this familiar distinction, but which also takes seriously the idea that a singular thought might merely purport to refer. In other words, a thinker can think about a particular object and yet fail to refer to that object in thought. The central case I shall discuss is the case where there really is no such object: where the object thought about does not exist. (The other case, which I will not discuss, is where a thinker aims to think about some particular object but fails because there are many objects upon which his thought alights.) I will argue that there can be genuinely singular thoughts about objects that do not exist.

This conception of singular thought is in opposition to a dominant (maybe even the orthodox) view. On what I will call this orthodox view, singular thoughts are *object-dependent*: they depend for their existence on the existence of the object or objects they are about. John McDowell defines a singular thought as 'a thought that would not be available to be thought or expressed if the relevant object, or objects, did not exist' (McDowell 1982, p. 204). So it cannot be enough, on this orthodox view, that a singular thought merely purports to refer to just one object. The thought must also succeed in referring to it.

The obvious advantage of the orthodox view is that it gives a simple explanation of what makes a thought *singular* rather than gener-

al. The orthodoxy explains this difference by saying that the thought
ontologically depends on the existence of the particular object it is
about. The standard way to spell this out is to treat a singular
thought episode as a propositional attitude, with a singular proposi-
tion as its content. Singular propositions are then construed either in
the style of Russell—as containing the particular object they are
about—or as some followers of Frege do, as containing object-de-
pendent senses.[3] The singularity of a singular thought is guaranteed
by the thought having a content which either contains or is constitu-
tively dependent on the particular object it is about. So if that object
had not existed the content would not either, and neither would the
thought episode.[4]

   However, if there is genuinely singular thought about the non-ex-
istent, then this object-dependence thesis is false. And there do seem
to be straightforward cases where a thinker's thought is aiming to
refer to some particular thing which does not exist. I will use a clas-
sic example that is all the better for being a real one. The term 'Vul-
can' was introduced in 1859 by the French astronomer Urbain Le
Verrier as a name for a planet orbiting between Mercury and the
Sun. Le Verrier had previously discovered the planet Neptune, using
much the same methods as he went on to use when hypothesizing
Vulcan. Once the name 'Vulcan' was introduced, those who used it
were, on the face of it, taking themselves to be talking about (and
therefore thinking about) just one object. In many ways their
thoughts are similar to thoughts about other, existing planets—
'Vulcan might appear tonight' seems to express a similar kind of
thought to 'Neptune might appear tonight', etc. Those who think
about Vulcan seem to be having thoughts that are aiming to refer to
a particular object just as the thoughts about Neptune are.

   I talk here of a thought being 'about' something non-existent, and
that such thoughts fail to refer. I therefore distinguish (by stipula-
tion) between aboutness and reference. Reference is a relation to an
existing thing, by definition; aboutness is the mere representation of
some thing in thought, whether or not it exists. So although I can-

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[3] For the first option, see Kaplan (1989), Salmon (2010), Williamson (2002); for the sec-
ond, see Evans (1982), McDowell (1984). Armstrong and Stanley (forthcoming) argue con-
vincingly that having an object as a constituent is not a requirement for a proposition to be
singular in the relevant sense.

[4] McDowell, for example, writes: 'if one utters a sentence of the relevant sort, containing a
singular term that, in that utterance, lacks a denotation, then one expresses no thought at
all; consequently neither a truth nor a falsehood' (McDowell 1982, p. 204).

not *refer* to Vulcan—'Vulcan' is, after all, commonly called a 'non-referring term'—I can talk or think *about* Vulcan. It is possible to regiment our ordinary talk in a different way; one could insist that it is not possible for a thought episode to be genuinely *about* something non-existent, so aboutness must go with reference (see Bach 2010). But if one takes this view of 'aboutness' one will need some other way of describing what I call 'my thoughts about Vulcan'. Someone might say, for example, that the thoughts *represent* Vulcan, although they are not *about* it. I'd rather say my thoughts are about Vulcan, but they do not refer to Vulcan. I hope it is obvious that this difference is terminological.

II

Acquaintance and Object-Dependence. On the face of it, then, there are examples of thoughts which are about a particular object, but where that object does not exist. The defender of object-dependence might deny that these thoughts are genuinely singular. So this is our question: what is it for a thought to be genuinely singular? In a recent paper, François Recanati defines *singularism* as the doctrine that 'our thought is about individual objects as much as it is about properties' (Recanati 2010, p. 142). But given my remarks at the end of the previous section, this should be common ground. What is not common ground is whether these thoughts are object-dependent.

A broad contrast can be made between psychological approaches to the phenomenon, and epistemological or metaphysical approaches. When introducing the phenomenon above, I started with Quine's definition of a singular term and applied it to thought: a thought that purports to refer to just one object. I then described a thought's 'purporting' in terms of the thinker's *aims* or *intentions* in referring: the thinker is aiming their thought towards—that is, intending to refer to—just one thing. And what matters is not that the thought happens to refer to just one thing, but that it has a specific *cognitive role*. Singularity is a matter of the cognitive—that is, the psychological or phenomenological—role of the thought.

The orthodox approach tends to characterize singularity in more epistemological and metaphysical terms. In a recent paper, for example, Joshua Armstrong and Jason Stanley make the following claim about singular thought:

> Intuitively, a singular thought about an object *o* is one that is *directly about o* in a characteristic way—grasp of that thought requires having some special epistemic relation to the object *o*, and the thought is on-tologically dependent on *o*. (Armstrong and Stanley forthcoming, §1)

Armstrong and Stanley here propose two familiar conditions on something's being a singular thought. Their first condition is that having a singular thought requires the thinker to stand in some special epistemic relation to the object the thought is about. An epistemic relation (like any relation) can only hold between existents, so if having a genuinely singular thought entails the existence of such an epistemic relation, it will also entail the existence of the object of thought (a metaphysical condition). This second (metaphysical) condition just is the claim of object-dependence. What we were looking for, however, is a reason to believe this claim. For this reason, I will focus here on the first condition: that there is a special epistemic relation between thinker and object. Perhaps this will give us such a reason.

What might such a special epistemic relation be? Orthodox theorists here tend to appeal to the notion of *acquaintance*, often with a reference towards Russell's famous discussion (1918). However, for various reasons, Russell's notion of acquaintance will not help the orthodoxy. Russell defined 'acquaintance' as follows:

> I say that I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself. (Russell 1918, p. 152)

It is clear from this definition that Russell is not using the English words 'acquainted' in its normal sense. For in its normal sense, being acquainted with something or someone is just a matter of *knowing* it, more or less well, or being more or less familiar with it ('know' here in the sense of *connaître*, *conoscere* or *kennen*, etc.). And this is something like a state, or a persisting condition, not something event-like or episodic. Yet being 'directly aware' of something sounds like an experience, and therefore something episodic.[5]

In addition, in the ordinary sense of acquaintance, the objects of acquaintance need not be objects of singular thoughts. Visiting a foreign land, I might become acquainted with the local customs about

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[5] I owe this point to Mike Martin.

how people eat there. But there is no question of my being able to have singular thoughts (in any sense) about these customs. My point here is that Russell is not appealing to an ordinary sense of 'acquaintance'; he is obviously using the term in a special technical sense.

What is this technical sense? Russell's description of acquaintance in terms of being 'directly aware' suggests that it is some kind of perceptual relation, and some philosophers have taken acquaintance that way (see Recanati 2010; Dickie 2010, p. 213). But in fact Russell cannot have meant that we perceive all objects of acquaintance by means of the senses, since among the objects of acquaintance are the self (which we do not perceive) and universals, including non-sensible qualities and relations such as 'relations of space and time, similarity, and certain abstract logical universals' (Russell 1918, p. 109). For Russell, the relation in which you stand to these universals, yourself and to sense-data was the same—acquaintance. What made the epistemic acts different were the relata. Russell's account of acquaintance is very remote, then, from the concerns of contemporary thinkers who like to think of acquaintance in terms of perception.[6]

However, even if 'acquaintance' does mean something like sense-perception, then it still does not follow that acquaintance is a condition of singular thought as many orthodox want it to be. One reason for this is that a standard component of the orthodox view is that I can have a singular thought about an object when I can name it (Salmon 2010). And yet there is no reason to think that I can name only those things I have perceived (or can perceive). So if acquaintance is a necessary condition for singular thought, and we can have singular thoughts about things we can name, then acquaintance cannot be limited to perception.

Jeshion (2010a, p. 109) has proposed on behalf of the acquaintance theorist that they should think of acquaintance in terms of relations of perception, or of memory, or of communication. This would allow for many thoughts which are expressed using names to be acquaintance-based. As Jeshion makes clear, the reason why theorists want to insist on an acquaintance condition on singular thought is because they want to rule out thoughts expressed using certain special kinds of referring expressions as being genuinely sin-

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[6] And we should not simply use the term 'acquaintance' for whatever epistemic relation makes singular thought possible: I agree here with Daly (2007).

gular. These are, for example, thoughts expressed using 'descriptive names' in Evans's (1982) sense, or using invented devices like Kaplan's 'dthat' (Kaplan 1989). It is not plausible that someone who uses Kaplan's name 'Newman 1' to denote the first person born in the next century has any one person in mind or is aiming at any one person in thought. Their thought happens to alight on someone, if there is someone satisfying this condition—and this is the mark of a general thought.

But just as these are clear cases of singular terms being used without expressing singular thoughts, there also seem to be equally clear cases of singular thought (in the sense of a thought aiming at a particular object) which fail to meet even the broadened acquaintance condition. Jeshion (2010*a*, p. 117) makes this point effectively with a number of examples, one of which will suffice to give the flavour of her position. Someone who has been adopted as a child might form a desire to meet his biological mother; he expresses his thoughts by saying 'I'd do anything to meet her' (Jeshion 2010*a*, p. 117). There is a particular person his thought is directed on or about; but there is no acquaintance (even in the broad sense) with this person.

Notice that it does not show that the thought is 'really' general that we would also say of this case, 'he doesn't know who she is'. The ordinary notion of 'knowing who someone is' is clearly highly context-sensitive, as many writers have noted (see e.g. Boer and Lycan 1984; Jeshion 2010*a*; Taylor 2010, p. 97). Sitting at my desk, I am asked: do I know who Tim Berners-Lee is? Of course; he is the inventor of the World Wide Web. But if I am at a social event where he is present, do I know who he is, in the sense of: do I know which person here he is? Not unless I can recognize him. As a matter of fact, I can't recognize Sir Tim by sight, so in that context I don't know who he is. One can think singularly about someone even if there are contexts in which it is true to say that one does not know who they are.[7]

Jeshion's examples show, independently of the issue of non-existence, that singularity of a thought does not depend on acquaintance —even in a broad sense of that term. The examples of non-existent objects like Vulcan only serve to reinforce the point. I therefore reject Armstrong and Stanley's claim that it is intuitive that a singular

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[7] This does not tell against the views of those philosophers, for example Evans (1982), who have constructed accounts of thought based on a technical notion of 'knowing which'.

thought requires some epistemic relation to the object of thought. What is intuitive or obvious is the distinction between general thought and singular thought, where singularity is understood in terms of aiming to refer in thought to some particular thing. But I deny that it is obvious that aiming to refer in thought to some particular thing requires that one be in some special epistemic relation with that thing.

What *is* obvious is that there are things and people we know better than other things; places we know better than other places; and the knowledge you get when recognizing something by sight (for example) is different from the knowledge that one has when reading about it in a book. There are many distinctions we can make between kinds of knowledge, and the thoughts we have about things do vary depending on the ways we know these things. However, I am sceptical that any specific way of knowing something lines up systematically with thinking about a particular object as such.

III

De Re Thought. The phenomenon of singular thought is, it seems to me, neither a distinctively epistemic phenomenon nor a distinctively metaphysical one. In the previous section, I argued that there is no reason to connect acquaintance in (some of) its various philosophical senses with the capacity to think singular thoughts. I will now question whether there is any reason to associate a particular style of *attribution* of thought with singular thought.

Many philosophers associate the idea of singular thought with the idea of *de re* thought. Kenneth Taylor, for example, has written about '*de re* or singular thought' as if they were two terms for the same thing. And Jeshion opens the introduction to her recent collection by distinguishing between two kinds of thought:

> Thoughts of the first type are variously known as descriptive, *de dicto*, conceptual, or notional thoughts. Thoughts of the second type are known as singular, *de re*, purely referential, or relational thoughts. (Jeshion 2010*b*, p. 2)

If singular thought were the same kind of thing as *de re* thought, then the position I am trying to sketch in this paper would be impossible. For it is normal to describe a *de re* thought as one which

essentially involves a relation to an existing object. As Tyler Burge said in a classic paper, 'a *de re* belief is a belief whose correct ascription places the believer in an appropriate nonconceptual, contextual relation to the objects the belief is about' (Burge 1977, p. 51). So if singular thoughts are *de re* then they must be object-dependent.

I think there is a connection between the idea of a singular thought and the idea of a *de re* thought. But this connection does not make singular thoughts object-dependent. To explain why I need to say a little about what is meant by '*de re* thought'. Traditionally, the distinction between the *de re* and the *de dicto* is conceived as a distinction in the relative scope in a sentence of a name or a quantifier and some other operator or predicate in the sentence. As such, it is a syntactic or a logical distinction. A recent survey article defines 'syntactically *de re*' as follows:

> A sentence is syntactically *de re* just in case it contains a pronoun or free variable within the scope of an opacity verb that is anaphoric on or bound by a singular term or quantifier outside the scope of that verb. Otherwise, it is syntactically *de dicto*. (McKay and Nelson 2010)

So a claim of *de re* necessity is a claim concerning some thing that it is necessarily so-and-so; a claim of *de dicto* necessity is a claim that it is necessary that some thing is so-and-so. Claims about the *de re* and the *de dicto* are claims about scope.

Contemporary discussion of the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* psychological states begins with Quine's paper, 'Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes' (1956), where it is called the distinction between *relational* and *notional* senses of attitude verbs like 'believe'. When I say that Oedipus believes that Jocasta is his wife, I am giving a notional (*de dicto*) attribution of belief, whereas when I say that Jocasta is such that Oedipus believes that *she* is his wife, then I am giving a relational (*de re*) attribution. The terminology is appropriate, since the second description *relates* one to the object (*res*) specified outside the scope of 'believes'.

It should be entirely uncontroversial that this distinction can be made, and that we ascribe beliefs and other attitudes in both ways. (Or more precisely, our commonsense psychological attitude ascriptions can be represented or regimented in both kinds of way.) So if the existence of *de re* attitudes is simply a matter of the truth of these *de re* or relational attributions, then everyone should accept that there are *de re* attitudes. But what has this got to do with singular thought?

Despite the persistent association of singular thought with *de re* thought, it seems to me that these are very different phenomena. Moreover, this is true both on the orthodox conception of singular thought and on the conception I am trying to develop here. On the orthodox conception, a singular thought act is singular because it has an object-dependent content. This content can either be a Russellian singular proposition or a Fregean object-dependent *Gedanke*. Clearly, such thoughts are attributed in *de dicto* attributions, the standard propositional attitude attribution form. Singular propositions are intended to play the role of the propositions which are the relata of propositional attitudes in the ordinary sense. There is no need for them to be attributed in a *de re* way, though they can be.[8]

It might be said that even if the *de re* and the singular are not the same thing, nonetheless any attribution of a singular thought *entails* a *de re* or relational attribution. This will be true on the orthodox view, since singular thoughts are object-dependent. So from any singular thought attribution of the form '*S* believes that …*a*…' where *a* is a singular term, we can infer both '*a* is such that *S* believes … of *a*' and the existential generalization 'there exists something *x* such that *S* believes … of *x*'. For the orthodoxy, then, this is the link between the singular and the *de re*.[9]

However, if we approach the issue of singularity via the idea of *aiming to refer in thought to just one object*, then not all apparently singular thoughts will entail a *de re* thought ascription. This is illustrated by a nice example of Mark Sainsbury's, when discussing Quine's distinction between the relational (*de re*) and the notional (*de dicto*). Note that Sainsbury puts his point in terms of 'specificity', but he could have used the word 'singularity' in the present sense:

> Jack has envisaged a sloop in considerable detail, and has commissioned full plans and given her a name: the *Mary Jane*. No other sloop will do. Jack's desire is specific, in that it fails the 'any old sloop will do' test: he doesn't want merely 'relief from slooplessness' … Yet something goes wrong and the *Mary Jane* is never built, and so never exists. In this case, Jack's desire has the specificity it would have had if it had been relational, even though it is not relational: there is no sloop he wants, no sloop that could satisfy his desire. (Sainsbury 2009, p. 127)

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[8] Hence McDowell's 1984 paper is misleadingly titled '*De Re* Senses'.

[9] I ignore here for simplicity the question of how we should understand quantification and the 'there is' idiom in English. On this matter see McGinn (2002), Priest (2005), Azzouni (2007).

What Sainsbury's example shows is that a thought can be singular in my sense without entailing a *de re* attribution. And there can be *de re* attributions which are not attributions of singular thoughts. If there is a shortest spy, then the shortest spy is such that I believe of him that he is a spy, merely in virtue of believing that there is a shortest spy. I agree with those who say that this is not an attempt to think about one particular object; it is a kind of general thought. But the attribution is *de re*.[10]

There are those, like Burge (1977), who have developed substantial theories about the way that thoughts are linked to their surrounding contexts, and call these theories of '*de re* thoughts'. Of course, one can use the terminology as one pleases, but I find this use of '*de re*' misleading, given the origin of the terminology and its otherwise perfectly clear use in modality and attitude ascriptions. I think it would be better for Burge to call his theory a theory of relational thought or intentionality.[11]

IV

Psychology and Semantics. The lesson of our discussion of *de re* thought is this. It is undeniable that there are *de re* attributions of singular thoughts and other psychological states. When someone makes such an attribution they aim to relate the subject of the state to some particular object, and they do this in a way that may be indifferent to the way that the subject conceptualizes the object. But there is no reason to think that there is a distinctive kind of psychological state which is reported by attributions of this distinctive kind.

To say this is not to take sides in the debate over the reduction of *de re* thought to *de dicto*. That is a matter of how different kinds of *attributions* are related. I am interested rather in the psychological reality reported by such attributions. One could treat the *de re* as irreducible to the *de dicto*, and still reject the idea that this reflects a distinction between two kinds of psychological state.

One could say an analogous thing about singular propositions.

[10] This paragraph skates over complex issues about the doctrines (associated with David Kaplan) of latitudinarianism and semantic intrumentalism. See Kaplan (1989) and Jeshion (2010a) for discussion.

[11] Burge makes it clear in his postscript to 'Belief *De Re*' that his concern is with a specific kind of attitude, and not with a specific kind of attribution (Burge 2007, p. 65).

We could accept that for some purposes, a psychological state could be assigned a singular Russellian proposition as its content; for other purposes a state could be assigned a singular Fregean proposition; for other purposes a set of worlds. But this does not force us to accept that there are different psychological episodes described by these different relations. There really *are* these relations; they can be appealed to for different explanatory or descriptive purposes; but this is consistent with there being one psychological reality which the relations pick out.

Which purposes could these be? Take the case of Oedipus again. You might want to describe Oedipus's desire to marry his mother by using a singular proposition, perhaps a Russellian proposition which contains Jocasta herself as a constituent. The reason you might do this is to highlight the fact that it is the very same person he wants to marry who gave birth to him. But of course, Oedipus didn't see it this way himself, since he was ignorant of this fact. So if we wanted to highlight how things were from Oedipus's point of view, we should pick a propositional object that represents things more finely than Russellian propositions do (for example, a Fregean *Gedanke*).

In the case of Vulcan, one would not use a singular proposition to describe Le Verrier's belief that Vulcan orbits the sun. For there is no such proposition, since Vulcan does not exist. (I am assuming that propositions exist only if their constituents do. Although this could be questioned, I will not do so here.) So one would have to pick out Le Verrier's belief using some other kind of abstract object —for example, by using a 'gappy' proposition (Braun 1993), or a Fregean non-object-dependent *Gedanke* which contains a sense representing Vulcan. Or one might abandon the apparatus of propositions altogether and try to give a more minimalist semantics, for example by using homophonic Davidsonian truth theories as theories of meaning. Sainsbury (2005) does such a thing in his unified account of referring and non-referring names.

These projects are all semantic projects, in the sense that they attempt to show how the truth conditions and truth-values of sentences are fixed (if at all) by the semantic properties of their parts and their mode of combination. Theories typically do this by associating some entities (semantic values) with the semantically significant parts of sentences, and showing how the relations between these entities determine truth conditions and how truth conditions determine a truth-value in a context (normally a world, time or speaker,

depending on the theory). A semantics for propositional attitude
sentences typically (but not in every theory) associates a proposition
with the complement clause of the attitude ascription.

   The role of propositions, on this conception, is to pick out or
model some aspect of a subject's mental state. 'Model' here is meant
broadly in the way it is used in scientific theory and practice—as
one might model a cognitive process on a computer, or as one might
model a weather system, or population growth, and so on. Two fea-
tures of models are relevant here. The first is that models idealize.
They abstract away from the messy complexity of what is being
modelled. Propositions can idealize in this sense: for example, it is
common these days to attribute propositional contents to perceptual
experiences. When Alex Byrne (2005, §3.2) describes a subject's vis-
ual experience as the experience of a blue book, and says this can be
represented as a Russellian proposition <o, blueness>, he is surely
idealizing away from everything else that is experienced at that time.
After all, no one simply experiences a blue book.[12]

   The second feature is that a model has some properties which can
be mapped onto the properties of the modelled system in a way that
illuminates that system's behaviour. So, for example, logical or in-
ferential relations between propositions can be used to model logi-
cal or inferential relations between beliefs. One could use this
feature of propositional models to predict what someone might do,
or to display normative facts: for example, how you should modify
your beliefs if you are going to be rational. So the use of proposi-
tions as models can extend beyond compositional semantics, into
decision theory and formal representations of rationality.

   I propose that this is how we should think about relations to prop-
ositions in general, and relations to singular propositions in particu-
lar. If there are such propositions—and I do not deny that there
are—then there are relations between thinkers and these proposi-
tions, which hold in virtue of the fact that they are used to model psy-
chological states in a compositional semantics or a decision theory.

   But it might be objected: how can someone hold that singular
thoughts can be relations to singular propositions, and yet deny the
object-dependence of singular thoughts? Surely if you accept that
there *are* relations to singular propositions, then you accept the or-

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[12] For more on how this picture of propositional attitudes applies to perception, see Crane
(forthcoming).

thodox view of singular thought? The answer to this is that on the view outlined here, the relation to a proposition is not a basic or ground-level fact. It is a theoretical construct employed by semanticists and others. On my view, you do not give a fundamental explanation of a mental act by saying it is a relation to a proposition. This is a description of the mental act, useful for some purposes. But, as we learned from our discussion of *de re* thought, there is a distinction between the mental act itself and descriptions of the act.

It is for this reason that we can say both that a singular thought can be described as a relation to a singular proposition, and that the episode so described could be what it is whether or not the object (and therefore the singular proposition) had existed. Conversely, some singular thought episodes cannot be described as relations to singular propositions, because their objects do not exist. But the psychological episode is of a kind that could have been described by a singular proposition, if the object in question had existed.[13]

The view outlined here could be called 'psychologistic' in the sense that it looks to the psychological facts for the fundamental explanation of thought.[14] It contrasts with a semantic approach to the psychological, which attempts to give a systematic theory of attributions of thoughts and other attitudes. As noted above, semanticists have employed various different kinds of abstract objects in their accounts of attitude attributions. There is no clear consensus about when such attributions report genuinely singular thoughts. Rather than conclude that the category of singular thought is hopelessly vague, I prefer to look instead at the psychological reality that these attributions report in their various ways.

It is for this reason that I agree with François Recanati, when he writes:

> Personally, I think it's a bad idea to start from attitude reports [in characterizing singular thought], given the complexity of their semantics and their high level of context-sensitivity. We should rather start from the theory of thought (and in particular, the distinction between singular and general thoughts) and use elements from that theory, along

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[13] For a description of a similar position in connection with the singular content of perceptual experience, see Martin (2002, p. 198), to which I am indebted.

[14] Jeshion calls her somewhat similar view 'cognitivism' (2010*a*, p. 129). I prefer 'psychologism' because of the historical connection with the view rejected by Frege. Psychologism about logic and semantics are untenable; but psychologism about the psychological is surely on the right lines; see Crane (forthcoming).

with a number of other ingredients, in trying to understand the multi-faceted phenomenon of *de re* attitude reports. (Recanati 2010, p. 168)

What Recanati means by not 'starting' from attitude reports is that we should not let our conception of what a singular thought is be determined only by the form of a certain kind of report (for example, the availability of existential quantification into the attitude context). Our starting point should rather be the contrast between singular and general episodes of thinking. I have described this in terms of a thinker aiming to refer in thought to some particular object. We then should use whatever resources and data we have to illuminate this phenomenon. The datum I have been examining here is the fact that people can aim to refer in thought to an object that, as a matter of fact, does not exist.

V

The Singularity of Singular Thought. A psychologistic approach to thought locates the singularity of singular thought in the psychological or cognitive role of singular thought episodes. What this approach must then do is to explain what makes these episodes genuinely singular. In the final section of this paper I will outline what such an explanation might look like.

I assume here that thought episodes are representations. For any representation, there is a distinction between features of the representation itself and features of what is represented (its content). As explained above, the orthodoxy explains singularity in terms of features of content: the object of thought features in (is a constituent of, or is determined by) the thought's propositional content. The psychologistic approach, by contrast, explains singularity in terms of features of the representation (the thought episode) itself. What features of the representation are relevant to singularity?

To appreciate why singular thoughts are not general thoughts in disguise, we should consider the well-known arguments against the descriptive theory of names. The central idea here is that a name-like representation retains its ability to refer to its bearer independently of any specific general information that the user of the name holds to be true of its bearer. The user can succeed in referring to the bearer of the name '*N*' even if (a) they do not hold general beliefs which uniquely

identify *N*, and (b) the information they do hold is true of someone other than *N*. This I take to be one of Kripke's central insights.

The distinction I want to derive from these ideas of Kripke's is this: we can distinguish between the representation itself and the body of general information associated by the speaker with the representation. I find it useful, as many do, to think of the relevant mental representations as mental *files* (see, *inter alia*, Perry 1980; Bach 1987, pp. 34–7; Forbes 1990; Jeshion 2010*a*; Recanati 2010). When we form a representation of some object, we 'open a file' on that object. We then come to store certain information in the file. We should not think of the information in the file as the *meaning* of the name or other expression which we use to express the thought in question. The meaning of a term is something which is given by a correct semantic account of that part of the language. What a term means in a public language may be something which goes beyond any information a thinker may have about the referent of the term, and the information a thinker has may be far richer than the meaning.

What makes a file a singular file rather than a general one? Here I can only sketch an answer.[15] What is relevant to generality is not that as a matter of fact the information is true of many things, but the fact that a thinker can *make sense of it* being true of many things (or of different things in different possible situations). Conversely, what is relevant to singularity is not the fact that the information in one's file is true of just one thing, but that one cannot make sense of it as being true of many things. I can conceive of more than one thing being a natural satellite of the earth, even though there is just one; but I cannot conceive of more than one thing *being* the moon. My file associated with 'the moon' cannot contain the information that more than one thing is the moon.

What is crucial is how I am disposed to treat new information associated with the object of my thought. My file for the moon contains the information *natural satellite of the earth*. If I came to believe that the earth has more than one satellite, I would not simply add this information to the moon file, but I would open another file.

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[15] As Jody Azzouni points out in his reply to this paper (2011) this answer will not distinguish adequately between singular and plural representations or files. I acknowledge that Azzouni is right that this distinction needs to be made, and that my account as it stands does not make it. I hope that the essential idea described here can be modified to accommodate Azzouni's criticisms. But for obvious reasons, what I present here is the account to which Azzouni is responding.

My file for the moon (the real actual satellite) would now contain the information that it is not the only satellite of the earth, but I now have another file which also contains this information.

Suppose there are two twins, Ryan and Brian, whom I think are the same person. I have just one file, which contains information from each of them. When I come to realize that they are two and learn their names, I do not just add this information to the file I have; rather, my files 'split' and I associate one with one name and one with the other. I may not have sufficient information in each file to distinguish one from the other; but the important thing is that I have distinct files.

Contrast this with a general idea that I might have, say, the idea of a twin. When I discover that Ryan and Brian are twins, my 'twin' file (containing all the information I hold about twins and what it is to be a twin) does not split; the file remains as it was. What it is to aim in thought at one particular object, then, is a matter of how one is disposed to treat new information about an object and how this affects the identity of the files associated with the various objects one encounters. The cognitive role of singular thought—the literalization of the metaphor of 'purporting'—is here explained in terms of the nature of the mental files which collect the information we associate with the things we think about.[16]

Some theorists who think of genuine singular thought as object-dependent have come to accept that there is a sense in which thoughts about the non-existent may exhibit something like singularity. Recanati, for example, thinks that the content of a genuine singular thought is a singular proposition (2010, p. 142), and also defends a mental file approach to the mechanisms of thinking (he calls them 'singular thought-vehicles'). On Recanati's view, a singular thought-vehicle may be tokened without the subject having a singular thought, if the subject is not acquainted with the object the thought is about, or if there is no such object (Recanati 2010, p. 170). Acquaintance is what makes a singular thought-vehicle the vehicle of a genuine singular thought: so 'the conditions on singular

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[16] Much more needs to be said about the distinctive functions of mental files, which have been the subject of investigation by psychologists and philosophers. Particularly relevant here is Treisman (1988), Kahneman and Treisman (1984), and Scholl (2002). Of the many remaining philosophical tasks for the theory sketched here is an account of what it means to say that people are thinking about the same or different objects of thought, and a solution to Geach's puzzle of 'intentional identity' (Geach 1967).

thought content are more stringent than those on singular thought-vehicles' (2010, p. 185).

What Recanati is calling vehicles I am calling thought episodes; and we both think of these in terms of mental files. So it might seem as if the issue between us is terminological, and at one point Recanati implies as much himself:

> [N]othing is to prevent a theorist from using 'singular thought' in the sense of 'singular thought-vehicle'. I have no quarrel with the claim that Leverrier entertained a 'singular thought' thus understood, when he said to himself 'The discovery of Vulcan will make me famous'. (Recanati 2010, p. 185)

In a similar way, Taylor (2010, pp. 77–9) distinguishes between a thought episode's being *objectual* (apt for having a singular referent) and its being *objective* (actually having such a referent). He agrees that thoughts can be objectual without being objective, and comments:

> There is no harm in calling states of this sort [thoughts without referents] *thoughts* or *singular thoughts* as long as one recognizes that the singularity of such a thought is exhausted by its *mere purport of singularity*. (Taylor 2010, p. 97 n.24, my emphasis)

What it is for a thought to have 'mere purport of singularity' is what I have been trying to describe here. Although I agree with what a lot of Recanati and Taylor say, I cannot put the facts entirely in their terms, and to that extent the issue is not terminological. Recanati describes thought episodes as 'vehicles' and his view of singular thought *content* means that when Le Verrier says to himself 'The discovery of Vulcan will make me famous', the thought has no content. Yet the content of someone's thought is what they are thinking, and how can it be that Le Verrier was not thinking anything, merely airing an empty 'vehicle'? Similarly, Taylor describes a thought's purported singularity as an aspect of the 'form' of a thought rather than its content. But what Le Verrier thinks, I maintain, cannot be characterized simply in terms of its 'form', as if what was going on in him was something without content, in the sense of *what is thought*. (These are not supposed to be arguments against Taylor and Recanati, only descriptions of my disagreement with them.)

By contrast, the psychologistic view of singular thought recognizes that Le Verrier was genuinely thinking something, a thought with as much content as any thought has. This thought can be modelled

by relating it to a proposition, though not to a singular proposition; and the fact that there is no such singular proposition does not in any way threaten its status as a complete thought, nor as a singular thought. What Le Verrier was thinking was not just mere 'form' or an empty 'vehicle'. In fact, from a psychological or phenomenological point of view these ideas are hard to make literal sense of. The difference between the psychologistic view and these more orthodox singular thought theorists is substantial, not terminological.

VI

Conclusion. I claim that there is an intuitive distinction between thinking about the world in a general way and aiming to refer in thought to a specific object: a singular thought. There are many cases where thinkers appear to be having singular thoughts in this sense even though the object of the thought does not exist: aiming to refer to a specific object in this case fails to 'hit' the target object. I believe we should take these phenomena at face value: someone can think in the singular way about something even when that thing does not exist.

I have argued that there are no compelling reasons for thinking that a distinctive epistemic relation to an object is required for singular thought in the intuitive sense, and nor need singular thought be given in *de re* ascriptions. But the phenomenon of *de re* thought ascriptions shows that we must distinguish between the various ways of describing the thought's content and the thought episode itself, and therefore between a semantics which models thoughts in terms of relations to propositions and a psychological theory of thought episodes. In the case of singular thought, these psychological episodes are best construed in terms of mental files, whose cognitive role consists partly in the way they respond to information (or supposed information) about the identity of the object referred to. In this way, we can understand the singularity of singular thought in terms of a cognitive role which can be played out even in the case where the thought has no referent.[17]

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