

## **Cognitivism: A New Theory of Singular Thought?\***

Sarah Sawyer

University of Sussex

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**Abstract:** In a series of recent articles, Robin Jeshion has developed a theory of singular thought which she calls ‘cognitivism’. According to Jeshion, cognitivism offers a middle path between acquaintance theories—which she takes to impose too strong a requirement on singular thought, and semantic instrumentalism—which she takes to impose too weak a requirement. In this paper, I raise a series of concerns about Jeshion’s theory, and suggest that the relevant data can be accommodated by a version of acquaintance theory that distinguishes unsuccessful thoughts of singular form from successful singular thoughts, and in addition allows for ‘trace-based’ acquaintance.

### **1. Introduction**

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Address for correspondence: Sarah Sawyer, Department of Philosophy, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9QN.

Email: s.a.sawyer@sussex.ac.uk

Consensus has it that we can think about particular objects in two very different ways. The first way is to think of them purely conceptually, via descriptions. Thus I might think that a particular man is handsome by thinking *the tallest man in the bar is handsome*. Here my thought is about the particular man it is about in virtue of his satisfying the descriptive condition specified—that of being the tallest man in the bar. In such a case, I need not know who the tallest man in the bar is in order for my thought to be about him. The second way is to think of objects directly, without conceptual mediation by descriptive conditions. Thus I might think about the very same man in virtue of seeing him and thinking simply *he is handsome*. Here my thought is about that particular man because the mental corollary of ‘he’ refers deictically to the man in question in virtue of contextual, perceptual relations that hold between us. It is this latter, contextually dependent, singular way of thinking that interests me here.

Thought about singular thought is dominated by acquaintance theories<sup>1</sup>, according to which thinking about a particular object in a singular, non-descriptive way must be based upon the thinker’s acquaintance with the object thought about. There is inevitable disagreement about both the nature and the scope of the acquaintance relation. Is acquaintance essentially a causal relation or is acquaintance with eternal abstract entities possible? Is it essentially an immediate relation between the thinker and the object, or can there be acquaintance through memory, mediated by a chain of communication, or mediated by an evidential trace such as a footprint? Does acquaintance require complete knowledge of an object, or will a brief glimpse do? I will return later to the nature and scope of the acquaintance relation as it will prove crucial in adjudicating between the various theories of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Russell (1912), Kaplan (1969), (1989b), (2005), Burge (1977), Donnellan (1979), Evans (1982), McDowell (1984), (1986), Boer and Lycan (1986), Bach (1987), Salmon (1987), Lewis (1983), Recanati (1993), Soames (2001), (2003), and Reimer (2004).

singular thought. But despite disagreement over the details, agreement on the acquaintance condition itself is striking. Moreover, there is absolute agreement both that acquaintance with an entity requires that one stand in a real relation to the entity (a causal relation in the case of acquaintance with a concrete entity), and that acquaintance requires more than merely having a uniquely satisfied descriptive condition in mind.

The acquaintance condition is, however, rejected by a small number of theorists who hold a position known as semantic instrumentalism. On this view, whenever I have a description in mind that an object happens to uniquely satisfy, I can indeed entertain singular thoughts about that object simply by introducing a referring singular term (a proper name, a deferred demonstrative or pronoun, or a Kaplanian *dthat* expression) stipulatively to refer to the object that satisfies the descriptive condition. Thus I might begin by thinking a non-singular, descriptive thought that the tallest man in the bar is handsome, and subsequently stipulate that he (whoever he is) be called 'Pierre'. Having done this, according to semantic instrumentalism, I am then able to think the singular, non-descriptive thought that Pierre is handsome, even though my thought about him is not based on acquaintance and there is a very good sense in which I do not know who Pierre is. As Kaplan put it when he held the view, 'What allows us to take various propositional attitudes towards singular propositions is not the form of our acquaintance with the object but is rather our ability to manipulate the conceptual apparatus of direct reference' (Kaplan, 1989a: 536). But the lack of a substantive constraint on singular thought is counterintuitive, as is the apparent ability to generate singular thought at will. As a result, semantic instrumentalism has few advocates.<sup>2</sup>

It has been commonplace to think that one must choose between an acquaintance theory of singular thought on the one hand, and semantic instrumentalism on the other, with

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<sup>2</sup> See Harman (1977), Kaplan (1989a) and, more recently, Borg (2007). Kaplan reverts to an acquaintance theory in his (1989b).

popular opinion weighing heavily in favour of an acquaintance theory. However, in a series of recent articles, Robin Jeshion has developed a third theory of singular thought which she calls ‘cognitivism’ (Jeshion, 2002, 2004, 2009, 2010). According to Jeshion, cognitivism offers a middle path between acquaintance theories of singular thought—which she takes to impose too strong a requirement on singular thought, and semantic instrumentalism—which she takes to impose too weak a requirement. In this paper, I explore the motivation for cognitivism and examine its alleged theoretical advantages. I raise a series of concerns about cognitivism, and suggest that the relevant data can be accommodated by a new acquaintance theory that distinguishes unsuccessful thoughts of singular form from successful singular thoughts, and in addition allows for what I call ‘trace-based’ acquaintance.

## **2. Cognitivism: Jeshion’s Intuitive Taxonomy**

In her (2009, 2010), Jeshion offers a series of examples as test cases for our pre-theoretic intuitions about singularity. According to Jeshion, the three theories of singular thought—acquaintance theory, semantic instrumentalism and cognitivism—can be evaluated with respect to how well their classification of the examples accords with our intuitive classification. Crucially, according to Jeshion, it is only the classification provided by cognitivism that accords with intuition. Since much of the initial motivation for cognitivism depends on the classification of examples, I provide a number of them here.

### *Set 1: Examples involving acquaintance*

(1a) Perception: I see a man in a bar and come to have certain beliefs about him such as the belief that he is handsome.

(1b) Memory: I remember many of the days I spent with my grandfather and have numerous beliefs about him such as the belief that he baked delicious fruit cakes.

(1c) Communication: My friend talks at great length about a man she met and tells me his name is 'François'. I thereby come to have beliefs about François such as the belief that he is a photographer.

Since all three theories of singular thought classify the examples in this set as examples of singular thought, Jeshion takes them as common ground. The theories diverge, however, with respect to their classification of the examples in sets 2 and 3. The following examples, then, are presented in order to gauge our pre-theoretic intuitions. The examples are Jeshion's.

*Set 2: Flippant examples involving no acquaintance*

(2a) Newman 1: David Kaplan claimed to have introduced a proper name into the language by stipulating that 'Newman 1' refer to whoever satisfies the description 'the first person born in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century'. Does an assertion of 'Newman 1 is likely to be Chinese' express a singular thought about Newman 1?

(2b) Julius: Gareth Evans claimed to have fixed the reference of 'Julius' with the description 'the inventor of the zip'. Does an assertion of 'Julius was clever' express a singular thought about Julius?

(2c) Parking ticket: I pass a car which has been given a parking ticket. I have no interest in the particular car, the owner of the car or the legitimacy of the ticketing. I utter an off-the-cuff comment: 'She'll be upset', and then walk on giving the matter no further thought. Does my utterance express a singular thought (by means of a deferred demonstrative) about the owner of the car?

(2d) Footprints: As I run down the beach I see a set of very large footprints in the sand, and say ‘He has big feet’. I have no interest in the person who left the footprints, and run on, giving the matter no further thought. Does my utterance express a singular thought about the person who left the footprints?

According to Jeshion, intuition tells strongly *against* the singularity of the examples in this set. Semantic instrumentalism alone counts them as singular, and this serves merely to highlight the fact that semantic instrumentalism is too weak a theory of singular thought to be viable. What is typically thought to be needed to rule out such examples as singular is an acquaintance condition on singular thought—a condition which is not met in these cases. The imposition of an acquaintance condition, then, would keep the classification of these examples in accord with intuition. However, the third set of examples demonstrates, according to Jeshion, that the imposition of an acquaintance condition is itself mistaken.

*Set 3: Significant examples involving no acquaintance*

(3a) Unbomber: The name ‘Unabomber’ was introduced in the late eighties for the individual responsible for a series of mail bombings targeting university and airline personnel. Eighteen years elapsed between the first such bomb and the apprehension by the FBI of Theodore Kaczynski. Shortly after a mail bomb explosion, a student walks in to a University building to hand in a paper. In a frightened state, she looks at the packages in the mail room and utters to herself, ‘Maybe the Unabomber sent one of those packages’. Does the utterance express a singular thought about the Unabomber?

(3b) Bearprint: A group of people go camping. After setting up the tent they go down to the stream where they see a grown bear’s footprints. Later, after supper, they see fresh bear scat.

Knowing that bears are solitary and territorial, one of them says, ‘I think we should get off his turf.’ Does the utterance express a singular thought about the bear?

(3c) Vulcan: Having recently discovered Neptune, Le Verrier postulated another planet, this time to account for the observed perihelion of Mercury, which differed from the perihelion that classical mechanics predicted. He introduced the name ‘Vulcan’ to refer to the planet, and set in motion fifty years of research surrounding Vulcan. However, the planet turned out not to exist. Rather, it turns out that the perturbations in Mercury’s orbit are to be explained by the sun’s gravitational pull. Did Le Verrier’s utterances involving the name ‘Vulcan’ express singular thoughts about Vulcan?

(3d) Dessert Sensations: A man begins to plan a cake-delivering business, which, before he has made any business contacts or investments, he decides to call ‘Dessert Sensations’. When he says ‘I hope that Dessert Sensations is a success’, does he express a singular thought about his future business?

According to Jeshion, the examples in this set should indeed be classified as examples of singular thought. If Jeshion is right on this, there can be singular thoughts about individuals that do not exist (as in (3c)), and singular thoughts about future individuals that do not presently exist (as in (3d)). Crucially, there can be singular thought in the absence of acquaintance, which allegedly demonstrates that an acquaintance theory imposes too strict a requirement on singular thought.

In sum, then, Jeshion maintains that pre-theoretic intuition classifies the examples in sets 1 and 3 as examples of singular thought, but not the examples in set 2. Further, according to Jeshion, this is the classification that cognitivism and cognitivism alone provides, and hence cognitivism alone provides the correct theoretical account of singular thought.

Jeshion's appeal to intuitive judgements of singularity is apt to give rise to two related concerns. First, to what extent ought pre-theoretic intuition be allowed to dictate theory? After all, many people have the pre-theoretic intuition that knowledge is not factive, but epistemologists quite rightly disregard the intuition. Second, to what extent are Jeshion's intuitions shared? There are, after all, two strong intuitions that tell *against* Jeshion's taxonomy and hence against cognitivism. The first is that singular thought involves acquaintance; the second is that talk and thought 'about' non-existents such as Vulcan and Dessert Sensations is loose talk which should not be taken seriously. In fact, Jeshion explicitly acknowledges both that intuition is often guided by theory, and that there may well be disagreement over the classification of cases. But Jeshion maintains that once the theoretical motivation for cognitivism is appreciated, our intuitions about the classification of cases will align with hers. This implies that it is not so much *pre-theoretic* intuition that dictates Jeshion's taxonomy, but theory. This in turn demonstrates the importance of the theoretical motivation for cognitivism, to which we now turn.

### **3. Cognitivism: the Theoretical Motivation**

Cognitivism is driven by the view that singular thoughts form a cognitively significant group—that there is a specific cognitive function, or set of cognitive functions, that all singular thoughts share, and that is not shared by descriptive thoughts. Two general points follow from this. First, thoughts with the same cognitive role must fall into the same category (singular or descriptive). To illustrate, suppose a subject *S* sees a car being driven towards her and exclaims 'That car's heading straight for me!'. Suppose, further, that there is a subject *S\**, identical to *S* in all relevant respects, who merely seems to see a car being driven towards her when in fact there is no car there, and that as a result of her perceptual experience she too



exclaims ‘That car’s heading straight for me!’. In this scenario, S and S\* plausibly express beliefs with the same cognitive role—beliefs that function in the same way in their respective cognitive systems. After all, there is a sense in which they undergo the same kind of perceptual experience and a sense in which they will as a result perform actions of the same general type—screaming and jumping out of the way, for instance. According to cognitivism, in such a scenario we ought to maintain that S expresses a singular thought if and only if S\* does. To think otherwise is to give up on the classification of kinds of thoughts (singular versus descriptive) by cognitive role, and hence to abandon the claim that singular thoughts form a cognitively significant group.

Clearly this typing of singular thoughts by cognitive role cannot be honoured if singular thoughts are marked out by an acquaintance relation. Briefly put, an acquaintance relation is not itself cognitively significant. In our example, S is acquainted with a car and S\* is not. If singular thought involves acquaintance, then, S but not S\* expresses a singular thought by her utterance. Classification by acquaintance thus cuts across classification by cognitive role and hence undermines the claim that singular thoughts form a cognitively significant group. The cognitivist, then, must reject acquaintance as a condition on singular thought.

The second general point that follows from the core claim that singular thoughts form a cognitively significant group is that singular thoughts play a specific role in cognition that descriptive thoughts do not. On this front, Jeshion maintains that the function of a singular thought is to think about an object in what she calls a ‘psychologically neutral way’—that is, without thinking about it via any particular mode of presentation. Jeshion’s specific way of cashing this out is by appeal to an account of cognition as involving mental files that are labelled with mental names and contain information purportedly about the individuals thereby named. Contrasting singular and descriptive thought, Jeshion says, ‘one thinks a

singular thought by thinking *through* or *via* a mental file that one has about the particular object. By contrast, descriptive thoughts occur *discretely* in cognition, disconnected from any mental file' (Jeshion, 2010: 129). This attributes to singular thoughts a cognitive significance not shared by descriptive thoughts.

Thinking of individuals through mental files, then, is constitutive of singular thought. And this is unconstrained by acquaintance. Jeshion remarks, 'we can think from mental files about individuals with which we are unacquainted because our minds ... create such files ...' (Jeshion, 2010: 130). Indeed, a mental name can be introduced and a mental file thereby initiated, not only in the absence of an acquaintance relation, but also in the absence of an object that bears the name. A mental name can be introduced when one mistakenly believes there is an object to be named, as when Le Verrier introduced the name 'Vulcan'. A mental name can be introduced when one knows there is no object to be named, as when we assimilate 'Vulcan' for our own use, or introduce mental names for characters we know to be fictional. And a mental name can be introduced when one mistakes an utterance that contains no name for an utterance that contains one. For example, on hearing an utterance of 'A lass is usually good company', intended by the speaker to be a generic claim about lasses, and thus intended as the expression of a non-singular thought, the hearer might misconstrue the expression 'A lass' for the name 'Alice' and hence form a singular thought by introducing a mental name and initiating a mental file.<sup>3</sup> What is important here for mental file initiation, and hence singular thought initiation, is the subject's *taking* an expression to be a genuine name, not its *being* a genuine name.

This understanding results in a further alleged benefit for cognitivism over the standard acquaintance theory, one that is illustrated by Jeshion's 'communication chain argument' (Jeshion 2002, 2009). The argument aims to establish that if singular thought can be

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for the example and for forcing me to clarify this point.

transferred via chains of communication, then acquaintance cannot be a condition on singular thought. The reason is, in brief, that one's perception of an object (here taken as the ultimate ground of acquaintance) cannot itself be passed on in communication. This in turn leaves it mysterious why the use of proper names in communication can transmit singular thoughts at all. According to Jeshion, cognitivism has the theoretical advantage of explaining why proper names can serve as vehicles for the transfer of singular thought: the tokening of a mental name is the very essence of a singular thought, and since the tokening of a mental name can be expressed by the use of a name in conversation, this can in turn prompt the initiation of a mental file in the hearer. I agree that this is an advantage over the standard acquaintance theory. However, the new acquaintance theory defended below shares this benefit, and hence cognitivism has no advantage over the new acquaintance theory on this score. This will be explained in section 7 once the new acquaintance theory has been introduced.

#### **4. Three Potential Constraints on Singular Thought**

At this juncture it will be helpful to distinguish explicitly three potential constraints on singular thought: a quasi-semantic constraint—that the object be thought of directly rather than descriptively; a metaphysical constraint—that there be an object thought about; and an epistemic constraint—that the subject be acquainted with the relevant object. Acquaintance theories maintain that singular thought is subject to all three constraints. Semantic instrumentalism maintains that singular thought is subject only to the first two (the quasi-semantic and the metaphysical constraint). But cognitivism maintains that singular thought is only subject to the first, quasi-semantic constraint. Understanding the three theories of singular thought in terms of these potential constraints on singular thought makes it clear that acquaintance theories impose the most stringent standards on singular thought. But it also

makes clear that there is a sense in which cognitivism imposes the *least* stringent standards on singular thought. The question then arises: in what sense is cognitivism a more stringent theory of singular thought than semantic instrumentalism given that it rejects not only the acquaintance constraint but also the metaphysical constraint?

The answer lies in the examples in set 2—examples that are treated as singular by the semantic instrumentalist but as non-singular by the cognitivist. Semantic instrumentalism counts the examples as singular because it treats the introduction of a mental name as under the direct control of the thinker. The introduction of a mental name is unconstrained both by the thinker's social environment and, crucially, by the thinker's cognitive life. According to semantic instrumentalism, a thinker can simply decide to introduce a mental name whenever she likes. It is this claim—that the introduction of a mental name is under the direct control of the thinker—that Jeshion finds objectionable. A crucial tenet of cognitivism, in contrast, is that the introduction of a mental name corresponds to the initiation of a mental file, and that this is under the control of the thinker's *cognition* rather than under the control of the thinker herself. More precisely, a mental name is introduced only when a mental file is initiated, and a mental file is initiated only when the thinker needs to think about an object in a psychologically neutral way. And needing to think about an object in a psychologically neutral way is not under the direct control of the thinker—it depends, rather, on whether the relevant object is cognitively *significant* to the thinker. Thus Jeshion states the following constraint on mental name introduction and on mental file initiation:

*Significance Condition:* a mental file is initiated on an individual only if that individual is significant to the agent with respect to her plans, projects, affective states, motivations. (Jeshion, 2010: 136)

It is the significance condition that distinguishes the examples in set 2 from the examples in set 3. Jeshion writes:

What divides set 2 and set 3 cases is that the individuals in the latter set are all significant to the thinkers. ... In the set 3 cases, our subjects have interests, goals, knowledge and affective states tied to the subject of thought. ... [S]ociety feared the Unabomber, and there was a social interest in capturing him. Fear creates significance. Le Verrier and fellow scientists had an interest in making sense of their fund of astronomical evidence. Contrast both cases with Newman 1 [and] Julius ... Obviously, in ... these cases the individuals (supposed to be named) are entirely insignificant to the agents, having no impact whatsoever on the agents' actions, plans, emotions. (Jeshion, 2010: 126)

It is the absence of significance, then, rather than the absence of acquaintance, that marks out the examples in set 2 as non-singular. Further, it is satisfaction of the significance condition rather than mere semantic manipulation that marks out the examples in set 3 as singular, even in the absence of acquaintance. And this in turn makes intelligible Jeshion's claim that cognitivism is a stronger theory of singular thought than semantic instrumentalism.

## **5. The First Concern: Descriptive Content**

Jeshion is clear that Evans did not have a singular thought about the inventor of the zip. No mental name was introduced and no mental file about the inventor of the zip was initiated because the inventor of the zip was not significant to Evans in the relevant sense. But without the introduction of a mental name, there can be no introduction of a corresponding name into

the language. Evans's act of purported descriptive reference-fixing was, according to Jeshion, mere artifice, clearly failing the following condition on naming<sup>4</sup>:

*Psychological Neutrality*: If agent S aims to introduce a name N into her idiolect by fixing its referent, S succeeds in doing so only if S introduces N for the F because S aims to think about the F by mentally tokening N, without necessarily thinking about the F via any particular mode of presentation. (Jeshion, 2004: 600)

This entails that there are genuine names and there are merely apparent names. More generally, there are genuine directly referential expressions and there are merely apparent ones. The set 2 examples all involve merely apparent directly referential expressions, according to Jeshion.

Once the division between genuine and merely apparent directly referential expressions is in place, the question of how to understand an utterance containing a merely apparent directly referential expression must be answered. That is, we are owed a positive account of the content of utterances containing merely apparent directly referential expressions. We are told that such utterances fail to express singular thoughts, and one way of understanding a failure to express a singular thought is as expressing a descriptive thought. This seems to be Jeshion's understanding, judging from what she says about the parking ticket example:

Insofar as I have no interest in tracking the car owner, no affective states associated with the car owner, *my mind is tailored to use the pronoun merely as going proxy for an attributive use of a description*. Of course, I use a pronoun here, a term whose standard function is to refer, in a context of use, to the speaker's intended reference, as

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<sup>4</sup> It fails several other conditions on naming as well. See Jeshion (2002, 2004).

well as to pick up reference anaphorically. But in this context, cognition does not yield the referential use. (Jeshion, 2010: 126, emphasis added)

This suggests that when there is a failed attempt to introduce a directly referential expression by means of a reference-fixing description, sentences containing that merely apparent directly referential expression express descriptive rather than singular thoughts. Thus, for example, we might say that Evans expresses a descriptive thought by his utterance of ‘Julius invented the zip’ in virtue of his mind being tailored to use the apparent name as going proxy for a description.

This may be a plausible suggestion if considered in isolation, but it is a curious suggestion for Jeshion to make given what she says in the context of an earlier argument she provides against acquaintance theories (Jeshion, 2002, 2004, 2006). The earlier argument concerns the acquaintance theorist’s understanding of descriptive names. A descriptive name is simply a name that is introduced by an act of descriptive reference-fixing. Here we are to abstract away from the question of how the semantics of the descriptive name are subsequently understood so as not to prejudge the question of whether a descriptive name has descriptive or singular content. Acquaintance theorists treat sentences containing descriptive names in one of two ways. The first treats a sentence containing a descriptive name as expressing a singular proposition, although not one that a speaker can grasp in virtue of understanding the sentence (Donellan, 1979; Salmon, 1988; Kaplan, 1989b). On this view, such sentences express singular propositions that lie outside the grasp of the competent speaker. There is no singular thinking here, but I agree with Jeshion that it is implausible to maintain that there are sentences that express propositions that are ungraspable by people who understand them, and will not discuss the view further. The second treats a sentence containing a descriptive name as inheriting its content from the corresponding sentence

containing the relevant reference-fixing description (Recanati, 1993; Soames, 2003; Reimer, 2004). On this view, such sentences express descriptive propositions. But Jeshion argues against this understanding for the following reason. According to Jeshion, the same considerations that Kripke (in his 1980) adduces against descriptivism about *ostensive* names can be employed against descriptivism about *descriptive* names. Just as it is possible to use an ostensive name competently without knowing any associated description, says Jeshion, it is possible to use a descriptive name competently without knowing the relevant reference-fixing description. The content of a descriptive name, then, can no more be descriptive than the content of an ostensive name. If Jeshion is right about this, then, contrary to the acquaintance theorist's claim, a sentence containing a descriptive name does not express a descriptive proposition. This is then taken to support Jeshion's own claim that a sentence containing a descriptive name expresses a *singular* proposition. This reflects the alleged singularity of the set 3 examples. I am not concerned here with whether Jeshion's argument against the acquaintance theorist is correct. What concerns me is that *if* it is correct, then it tells against Jeshion's own claim that sentences containing merely apparent directly referential expressions express non-singular, descriptive propositions. By virtue of Jeshion's reasoning, Evans's utterance of 'Julius invented the zip' cannot express a descriptive proposition, because descriptive names do not have descriptive content. If this is right, there is a danger that cognitivism collapses into a version of semantic instrumentalism because the set 2 examples can no longer be conceived as descriptive, but must instead be conceived as singular.

There is a possible line of response here. It might be objected that there is a relevant difference between genuine descriptive names (as Jeshion understands the examples in set 3), and merely apparent descriptive names (as Jeshion understands the examples in set 2). The relevant difference, one might suppose, is this: while it is possible to use a descriptive name



competently without knowing the associated reference-fixing description, it is not possible to use a merely apparent descriptive name competently without knowing the associated reference-fixing description. After all, in the latter kind of case there is merely a failed attempt at reference-fixing and no name has been introduced into the language. In such failed attempts at reference-fixing, the apparent name fails to free itself from the associated description. As a result, merely apparent names *do* have descriptive content, even if genuine descriptive names do not. But this line of response is inadequate because it trades on a terminological disagreement. According both to the acquaintance theorist and to the cognitivist, there is a division in a certain class of terms (the apparent names) between those that have descriptive content and those that have singular content. The division is marked by standard acquaintance theorists as the difference between descriptive names and non-descriptive names, and by cognitivists as the difference between merely apparent names and genuine names. But the different terminologies mark the very same distinction. There is disagreement over where the division falls, of course, but this is because the division is dependent upon acquaintance according to the acquaintance theorist and cognitive significance according to the cognitivist. This particular argument against the acquaintance theory, then, tells equally against Jeshion's own theory and threatens to collapse cognitivism into a version of semantic instrumentalism.

## **6. The Second Concern: the Significance Condition**

The second concern about cognitivism relates to the significance condition. Significance plausibly comes in degrees. An individual can be more or less significant to a given thinker, as well as significant along different dimensions. But the initiation of a mental file is presumably not a matter of degree, and neither is singular thinking. The obvious concern,

then, is how significance (a gradable relation) can serve to ground the clear-cut phenomenon of mental file initiation and hence of singular thought. One possibility is to set a threshold so low that *any* minimal form of significance can ground the initiation of a mental file. But the suggestion leaves open to question the classification of the examples Jeshion presents in favour of cognitivism. It could be argued, after all, that there is a fleeting, minimal level of significance involved in both (2c)—the parking ticket example, and in (2d)—the footprint example. To be sure, the mental file would be deleted soon after initiation and hence of limited cognitive use, but the initiation of a mental file cannot be thought to depend upon either its subsequent use or its longevity. In the end, of course, the cognitivist position must be open to classification of the examples by empirical means. After all, the relevant question according to the cognitivist is whether a subject's cognitive system initiates a mental file in a given situation—not whether we, as philosophical theorists of singular thought, judge that a normal subject's cognitive system would initiate a mental file in that kind of situation. But it does look as if either significance is unable to ground singular thinking (because gradable), or the classification of the set 2 examples as non-singular is open to debate (because (2c) and (2d) involve a minimal level of significance).

Acquaintance, of course, is also a matter of degree. The same obvious concern, then, applies to a standard acquaintance theory. Perhaps this in part explains why there is so much debate about the nature and scope of the acquaintance relation: it is the search for a plausible but clear-cut account of acquaintance that drives the debate. Jeshion's discussion of acquaintance theories is restricted to theories that admit only three forms of acquaintance: acquaintance based on perception, memory and communication. The restriction is admirably motivated by an attempt to be as uncontroversial in her examples and discussion as possible. However, the introduction of a new form of acquaintance (to be argued for in the next section) changes the debate between the acquaintance theorist and the cognitivist

significantly. As will become clear, the introduction of this new kind of acquaintance is advantageous in that it not only overcomes the fact that acquaintance is a gradable relation, but also serves to ground a position on singular thought that can accommodate both the appeal of cognitivism and the appeal of an acquaintance theory. The task of the next section is to outline and defend a new acquaintance theory, one that distinguishes unsuccessful thoughts of singular form from successful singular thoughts, and allows for what I call ‘trace-based’ acquaintance.

## 7. Interlude: Cognitivism and the New Acquaintance Theory

I do not here dispute Jeshion’s claims about the significance of names or about the cognitive difference between thinking via a mental file and thinking descriptively. Indeed, what is appealing about cognitivism is precisely that it aims to group singular attitudes by cognitive similarity: and this can be made sense of by equating singular thinking with thinking through a mental file. However, what I want to suggest is that these claims are not inconsistent with an acquaintance theory of singular thought. In particular, it is possible to group singular thoughts by cognitive similarity even while upholding an acquaintance relation on singular thought so long as one distinguishes, as one must, between thoughts of singular form (whether successful or not) and *successful* thoughts of singular form (that is, successful singular thoughts).<sup>5</sup> This section, then, moves us towards a proposal that reconciles two apparently conflicting intuitions—Jeshion’s intuition that singular attitudes should be grouped by cognitive similarity, and the standard intuition that singular thought involves acquaintance. Thoughts of singular form are those, as Jeshion would put it, that involve thinking through a mental file. As such, thoughts of singular form do not necessarily involve

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<sup>5</sup> Distinctions along these lines can be found in Burge (1977), Sainsbury (2005, 2010) and Taylor (2010).

acquaintance. Indeed, thoughts of singular form are subject to neither the epistemic nor the metaphysical constraints noted in section 4 above. Rather, thoughts of singular form are subject merely to the quasi-semantic constraint, in accord with the cognitivist claim. Accordingly, thoughts of singular form constitute a group of attitudes that are cognitively significant. A thought counts as a thought of singular form in virtue of its internal composition rather than its extrinsic relations. *Successful* singular thoughts, by contrast, are a mere subset of thoughts of singular form. It is successful singular thoughts that are subject to all three potential constraints. Successful thoughts of singular form therefore do involve acquaintance. They are marked out in part by their internal composition and in part by their extrinsic relations.

It is plausible to think that on the standard acquaintance theory, acquaintance performs the function of distinguishing singular from descriptive thought. It is worth noting, however, that once the distinction between thoughts of singular form and successful singular thoughts has been acknowledged, acquaintance no longer plays its traditional role. Rather, there are two relevant distinctions according to the new acquaintance theory. The first is that between *descriptive thoughts* on the one hand, and *thoughts of singular form* on the other. A descriptive thought is one that is fully conceptual. Consequently, a descriptive thought is about an object (if it is) in virtue of purely conceptual relations between the thinker and the object. A thought of singular form, in contrast, is one that is not purely conceptual, but contains in addition to its conceptual elements, one or more places for objects. A thought of singular form is thus about an object (if it is) in virtue of containing it, and which object a thought contains is determined not purely conceptually but rather, in part, by contextual relations that hold between the thinker and the object thought about. This first distinction is marked out not by acquaintance but by cognitive significance. The second distinction, in contrast, marks out the class of *successful singular* thoughts, now understood as a subset of

the class of thoughts of singular form. A successful singular thought is simply a thought of singular form that in fact contains one or more objects. The evaluation of a successful singular thought therefore makes essential reference to the object or object it contains. This second distinction is marked out by acquaintance.<sup>6</sup>

Whether one chooses the term ‘singular thought’ to mark out the set of thoughts of singular form (as cognitivism does), or to mark out the set of successful singular thoughts (as an acquaintance theory does) is, I think, a matter of emphasis—a terminological preference, one might say. Thus a cognitivist might acknowledge that there is a sense in which (3c)—the Vulcan example—involves an unsuccessful thought, but emphasise that it is a singular thought nonetheless; whereas a new acquaintance theorist might acknowledge that (3c) involves a thought of singular form, but will emphasise that it does not involve a successful singular thought. I say that a new acquaintance theorist *might* acknowledge that the Vulcan thought is a thought of singular form, but of course this will depend on the specifics of the theory, and in particular on the conditions on mental file initiation which lies at the heart of the current debate. I want to propose an acquaintance theory that *does* acknowledge that there is a thought of singular form in the Vulcan example. This new acquaintance theory not only acknowledges a distinction between thoughts of singular form and (successful) singular thoughts, but also embraces a novel kind of acquaintance in addition to those accepted by the standard acquaintance theory—that is, in addition to acquaintance through perception, memory and communication. This new kind of acquaintance involves mediated causal contact through perceived effects such as footprints and wobbles in orbits. I will refer to the

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<sup>6</sup> I am inclined to think that successful singular thoughts are conceptually fundamental, in that without them there could be neither unsuccessful thoughts of singular form nor descriptive thoughts. My inclination here is driven by an externalist understanding of concepts. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to elaborate this point further, let alone argue convincingly for it.

perceived effects of objects as evidential traces and will refer to the form of acquaintance based on an evidential trace as ‘trace-based’ acquaintance.

Just as there is more to be said about perception-based, memory-based and communication-based acquaintance, there is more to be said about what constitutes an object’s evidential trace, and hence about the conditions under which a subject is trace-based acquainted with an object. Here I provide two necessary conditions on trace-based acquaintance. First, an evidential trace is necessarily an evidential trace of some object, and hence trace-based acquaintance necessarily implies the existence of an object responsible for the evidential trace. This condition preserves the core idea of acquaintance as a genuine relation to an object. Second, an evidential trace is necessarily perceived. This condition preserves the core idea that all acquaintance is based in perception.<sup>7</sup>

With these two conditions on trace-based acquaintance in hand, it is clear that the Vulcan example does not involve an evidential trace (since Vulcan doesn’t exist), and hence clear that the Vulcan example does not involve trace-based acquaintance. There is, then, no singular thought here. However, the Vulcan example is relevantly similar to cases which do involve trace-based acquaintance, and given the grouping of thoughts of singular form by cognitive similarity, this suffices to show that the Vulcan example involves a thought of singular form (albeit an unsuccessful one). More generally, where there is prima facie evidence of an object, there can be thoughts of singular form. Prima facie evidence of an object can come through perception, memory, communication and prima facie evidential traces. All sources of singular thinking are fallible, and hence all sources of singular thinking can give rise to unsuccessful thoughts of singular form just as much as successful singular thoughts.

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, there may be room to extend the notion of trace-based acquaintance to incorporate acquaintance with abstract entities, but the issue is too complicated to address in this paper.

Having explained the new acquaintance theory, I now return to the alleged advantage Jeshion claims for cognitivism over acquaintance theories discussed towards the end of section 3. I there claimed that the new acquaintance theory shared the advantage, and we are now in a position to see why. Essentially, it is because both cognitivism and the new acquaintance theory allow that non-descriptive thought can be generated through error. Cognitivism does so by allowing that a singular thought can have no object; the new acquaintance theory does so by allowing that thoughts of singular form can have no object. Not only can the new acquaintance theorist claim this advantage alongside the cognitivist, but she can claim an additional advantage as well. The way in which the new acquaintance theorist accommodates this phenomenon has the advantage of maintaining that a singular thought has an object—something that the cognitivist has to give up.<sup>8</sup>

## **8. The Third Concern: the Taxonomy of the Examples**

It will be remembered that one of Jeshion's arguments in favour of cognitivism is a thought experiment which takes one from intuitive judgements about the taxonomy of examples to cognitivism. However, the taxonomy of the examples now needs to be re-evaluated in light of the new acquaintance theory with its two defining features: first, the distinction provided between unsuccessful thoughts of singular form and successful singular thoughts; and, second, the introduction of trace-based acquaintance. I leave the examples from set 1 to one side as there was initially no disagreement surrounding their classification, and there is no

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<sup>8</sup> The cognitivist might wish to add to her theory a distinction between successful and unsuccessful singular thoughts (as she would put it), but it is unclear how this could be done without reinstating something akin to an acquaintance relation.

reason to suppose this will change in light of the relevant considerations. Instead I will examine in turn the examples in sets 2 and 3.

Examples (2a)—Newman 1—and (2b)—Julius—are counted as non-singular both by cognitivism and by the standard acquaintance theory, and remain so on the new acquaintance theory precisely because the descriptive names are introduced without any basis in acquaintance or *prima facie* acquaintance. Examples (2c)—the parking ticket example—and (2d)—the footprints example—are also counted as non-singular both by cognitivism and by the standard acquaintance theory, but now there is reason to revise their classification. Once trace-based acquaintance is allowed to ground singular thinking, we see there is reason to accept both examples as involving singular thought. This is because both examples involve an evidential trace and hence should be classified as involving singular thoughts grounded in trace-based acquaintance. This alteration might be taken to indicate a difference in taxonomy between cognitivism and the new acquaintance theory. However, if the arguments in section 6 above are correct, then these examples can also be understood as involving significance, albeit at a minimal level. Once the two considerations have been taken into account, then, there is no reason to think the classifications of set 2 examples by a new acquaintance theorist and a cognitivist diverge.

What about the examples in set 3? Examples (3a)—the Unabomber example—and (3b)—the bear print example—were originally classified as singular according to the cognitivist and non-singular according to the standard acquaintance theorist. However, again, once we accept trace-based acquaintance, both examples will count as singular according to the new acquaintance theorist also. There are clearly evidential traces involved and hence the examples should be classified as involving singular thoughts grounded in trace-based acquaintance.



Example (3c)—the Vulcan example—was also classified as singular according to the cognitivist and non-singular according to the standard acquaintance theorist. But as we saw in section 7 above, the claim that the acquaintance theorist must classify the example as non-singular must be re-thought in light of the two distinctive features of the new acquaintance theory. To repeat, what justifies the introduction of a mental name and the initiation of a mental file in this case is the fact that there was a body of evidence (the perturbations in Mercury's orbit) that was (incorrectly) attributed to an object, and hence incorrectly thought of as an evidential trace. Clearly there was no real evidential trace, since there was no object (no planet Vulcan). Consequently, there was no trace-based acquaintance and hence no singular thought. However, if a correctly attributed evidential trace suffices to initiate a mental file that underwrites and makes possible successful singular thought, then a body of evidence incorrectly taken as an evidential trace must suffice to initiate a mental file too, even though, of course, there will be no object the mental file is about. What we have here is a case of merely apparent as opposed to genuine acquaintance with an object, and hence an unsuccessful thought of singular form.

Finally we turn to (3d)—the Dessert Sensations example. This, I think, is a much harder case to evaluate. Clearly the example cannot be regarded as a case of successful singular thinking. The reason for this is that we cannot be acquainted with, and cannot refer directly to, things which exist only in the future. Further, we would be rightly reluctant to attribute a successful singular thought to a man who dreamt of a future business that he never quite managed to get off the ground. But whether or not he has a successful singular thought about his future business prior to its existence cannot depend on whether or not he succeeds in setting it up. There is no relevant difference from the present perspective between postulating a future entity that later comes into existence, and postulating one that does not. Consequently, we are bound to conclude that in the Dessert Sensations case as described

there is no successful singular thought. Is there an unsuccessful thought of singular form? I confess to being unsure what to say about the example. On the one hand, the expression ‘Dessert Sensations’ as used by the man does appear to be a name.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there is some reason to think that the expression is simply shorthand for a definite description such as ‘the cake-delivering business I plan to set up’. But, interestingly, this indecision about the example is not confined to the new acquaintance theory—it affects cognitivism as well. Jeshion, of course, would classify the example as one of singular thought. But whether cognitivism *ought* to classify it as an example of singular thought depends on whether the example in fact satisfies the significance condition stated in section 4 above. And this is itself unclear. It is obviously significant to the man that he set up a cake-delivering business, but it is unclear that there is a particular, future cake-delivering business that is itself significant to the man and that he is trying to set up. It is worth noting that in the Vulcan example, although there is no particular planet that is significant to Le Verrier (since there is no planet responsible for the perturbations in Mercury’s orbit), it is nonetheless plausible that Le Verrier *takes* there to be a particular planet responsible for the evidence. In the Dessert Sensations example, in contrast, it is not clear that the man would even *take* there to be a particular, future business which is the very business he plans to set up. Indeed, it is hard to make sense of this understanding of things. Consequently, although this kind of case needs a resolution, I do not think anything hangs on it for present purposes. The example will be classified either as involving a singular thought according to the cognitivist and an unsuccessful thought of singular form according to the new acquaintance theorist, or as

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<sup>9</sup> If ‘Dessert Sensations’ is indeed correctly understood as a name, it could be argued that the example is after all an example of successful singular thinking because intentions constitute real relations to future objects and events in much the same way as perceptions constitute real relations to present objects and events. Such an argument would need much work, though.

involving a descriptive thought by both. Either way, the cognitivist and the new acquaintance theorist agree in their taxonomy of the examples. And in the end it is the *explanation* of the agreement that is significant. In sum, cognitivism and the new acquaintance theory agree in their classification of examples because they agree that thinking through a mental file grounds singular thinking, whether or not there is an object thought about. This undermines Jeshion's thought experiment from taxonomy to cognitivism, and instead provides further support for the claim that an acquaintance theory can accommodate the data that allegedly motivates cognitivism.

## **9. The Fourth Concern: the Referential Connection**

Looking back at the Dessert Sensations example, if we accept for the moment that it involves an unsuccessful thought of singular form, I think it plausible to maintain that at some point later than the initiation of the relevant mental file, that mental file may well come to be about the business. At that point the mental file enables not only thinking of singular form, but successful singular thought about Dessert Sensations. However, this does not mean that the file is about Dessert Sensations all along. Exactly how the file changes from being about nothing to about Dessert Sensations is a complicated issue, although no more complicated than issues concerning changes in reference over time generally. The issue does, however, bring to light a different, but related, and more general question: what makes a mental file about the individual it is about? And here I think the new acquaintance theorist has the upper hand. If there is a causal constraint on reference, then presumably there must be a causal constraint on the reference of mental names that label mental files. Since an acquaintance theorist incorporates into her account of successful singular thinking causal relations between the thinker and the individual thought about, it has the theoretical advantage of providing (at

least potentially) an answer to the question. Here I do not mean to rule out the possibility of acquaintance with abstract eternal entities outside our causal reach. I merely mean to emphasise that in the perceptual realm, where a causal theory of reference is appropriate, an acquaintance theory that incorporates a causal constraint on singular thinking is well-placed to answer the question of how a mental file gets to be about a given individual. It is unclear as yet how cognitivism might do so.

## 10. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined a new theory of singular thought—cognitivism—proposed as an alternative to the two standard theories—acquaintance theories and semantic instrumentalism. I have raised a series of concerns about cognitivism and have argued that the relevant data can be accommodated by a new acquaintance theory that distinguishes unsuccessful thoughts of singular form from successful singular thoughts, and allows for what I call ‘trace-based’ acquaintance. Moreover, this new acquaintance theory has certain theoretical advantages over cognitivism, as suggested by the prior concerns about cognitivism that have been raised. The motivation for cognitivism thus vanishes.

*Department of Philosophy*

*University of Sussex*

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