Singular Thought: The Division of Explanatory Labor

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A tacit assumption in the literature devoted to singular thought is that singular thought constitutes a unitary phenomenon, and so a correct account of it must encompass all instances. In this essay, I argue against such a unitary account. The superficial feature of singularity might result from very different deep-level phenomena. Following Taylor (2010) and Crane (2013), I distinguish between the *referential fitness* and the *referential success* of a thought. I argue that facts responsible for referential fitness (e.g., mental files or individual concepts), as well as facts responsible for referential success (e.g., acquaintance conditions on referential success), are relevant in explaining the data pertaining to a theory of singular thought. What makes this approach particularly attractive is that there are good independent reasons to introduce both kinds of facts in theorizing about thought.

Keywords: singular thought, referential success, referential fitness

There is an intuitive — that is, pre-theoretical — distinction between two kinds of beliefs, intentions, desires and other propositional attitudes, or, in general, thoughts. My thought that *the person I am looking at right now is very smart* is very different from my thought that *the inventor of the wheel, whoever she or he was, was very smart*. In the former case the thought has a perceived directness and aboutness that is missing in the latter case, which is a purely descriptive thought. Roughly speaking, this is the distinction between singular and general thoughts, or *de re* thoughts vs. *de dicto* thoughts. It is very easy to get as many paradigmatic cases of each kind of thought as one likes: believing that *she* (pointing at a particular student in class) *is German* is very different from believing that *the first student who will speak tomorrow in class, whoever she or he is, is German*. Even if it turns out it is the same person I am talking "about," the two thoughts exhibit a different sense of aboutness, and they connect in a very different way to the extra-linguistic reality. If this intuition is rejected then there is nothing to explain. However, in as much as there is a real distinction to be made here, some explanation is needed.

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Once the distinction is accepted, it may be thought that its explanation should invoke linguistic phenomena, and not facts about thought. The distinction, it may be argued, concerns the way we express our thoughts, and so, it is about language. To this we should reply that, although it is true that we do use language to express both singular and general thoughts, the distinction per se does not concern language. The distinction should not be identified with the semantic distinction between referential terms and quantifier expressions. For instance, sentences containing quantifier expressions can be used to express both singular and general thoughts. My reasons for uttering the sentence, "Every student in my class speaks Spanish," can be purely general (e.g., I have asked those in class who do not speak Spanish to raise their hand and no one did), or singular (e.g., I have only one student enrolled in my class, Maria, and I know she speaks Spanish). The same point could be made by looking at the different uses of definite descriptions. As Donnellan notes, when a description is used referentially, but not when it is used attributively, "the speaker presupposes of some *particular* someone or something that he or it fits the description" (1966, p. 288, italics in the original). The thought the speaker intends to convey is singular when the definite description is used referentially, but it is general when the same description is used attributively. Donnellan's (1966) examples, which I will not repeat here, help make this point vividly.

Let us then consider the above data as indicative of a genuine phenomenon concerning thought, not reducible to semantic facts. It is useful at this point to give due weight to the act/object ambiguity that "thought" exhibits: a thought is, on the one hand, an *act* of thinking, and on the other, that which one thinks, that is, a *content*.[1] Much of the literature on singular thought is focused on the latter notion, that is, on characterizing the content of singular thought. Nevertheless, focusing on the act of thinking may prove to be insightful as well. In particular, it helps us notice the distinction between *successful* acts of thinking singularly, as opposed to *failed* acts of entertaining a singular thought. In turn, this distinction suggests that we should separate two general questions concerning the conditions for thinking singular thoughts. These questions could be formulated as follows:

i. What are the conditions that have to be fulfilled in order to perform an act of thinking that purports to be about — or to refer to — one individual?[2]
ii. What are the conditions that need to be fulfilled for an act of thinking that purports to be about one individual to succeed, i.e. to be about — or to refer to — that individual?

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[1]Sellars (1956) called it the "ing/ed" ambiguity. Grice (1957) identifies "utterance" as exhibiting the same ambiguity. Bach (1998) adds "building," "shot," "writing," "inference," "statement," "thought," "perception" to the list.

[2]Crane (2013) uses "purporting to refer," which he borrows from Quine's *Word and Object*, where Quine uses it in relation to singular terms. Crane comments that this is a metaphor, adding that "thought does not purport to refer to anything, it is the thinker that may purport to do so" (p. 140).

These questions have also been formulated in slightly different terms. Taylor (2010, p. 79) distinguishes "objective" from "objectual" representations, by which he means representations that are merely "referentially fit," and need not be "referentially successful," vs. representations that are "referentially successful." Borrowing this terminology, we could reformulate the above question as follows:

a. What does it take to have a representation that is referentially fit?
b. What does it take to have a representation that is referentially successful?

Or we could use yet other terms:

1. What does it take to aim at an object in thought?
2. What does it take to hit the object you aim at in thought?

The formulation "to aim at an object in thought" belongs to Crane (2013, p. 141). If the metaphor of aiming in thought is useful then it seems to me the contrast that we want to draw is well suggested by using the metaphor of "hitting in thought" what one aims at.

This pair of questions, however one wants to express it, is methodologically important in as much as the questions allow us to classify theories of singular thought in two categories: which question do they address and how do they answer it. Although succeeding requires trying, a theory may focus on the conditions of success and not on the conditions that make an action a trial. On the other hand, a theory may focus on the conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to count as aiming at an object in thought (or aiming to entertain a thought about a particular object). Yet other theories may address both conditions of trial and conditions of success. However, as I argue in what follows, many theories focus primarily on only one of the two questions, and are well equipped to answer it. In consequence, the view of the nature of singular thought the theorist ends up with depends on which of the two questions she addresses.

One group of theories is built on the idea that the subject has to be referentially successful in order for the thought she entertains to be singular. Call such views *referential success approaches to singular thought* (or RS approaches, for short). The question these theories focus on is (ii). On an RS approach it is not sufficient that the subject purports to refer to an individual. The thought is genuinely singular only when everything goes well and reference in thought is successful. Naturally, RS theories require aiming at a particular object as well. However, on an RS approach it is not sufficient that there is an object the subject aims at. It is also necessary that the aiming results in a successful hit.

One might conceive of referential success as a claim about the truth-conditions of the bearer of the thought (e.g., an utterance of a natural language sentence, a sentence-token in the language of thought, or whatever vehicle of representation is deployed in thought). Thus, a singular thought would be a thought whose truth-conditions are object-dependent (as opposed to object-independent). If we use a standard framework for expressing truth-conditions that relies on possible

world semantics, the object-dependent thought is true depending on how things stand with the particular actual object, no matter which world of evaluation we consider. However, this approach fails: the natural language sentence (or its correspondent in the language of thought), "The actual president of France in 2013 is bald," has object-dependent truth-conditions. Its truth-value depends on how things stand with the actual president of France in 2013. But the sentence might be used to express a purely general thought, about whoever is the actual occupant of the presidency in 2013. The perceived directness and immediacy, which are phenomenological characteristics of singular thought, are not present in that case. Actualized definite descriptions, among other expressions, are devices of rigid designation but not of direct reference. That is, they do not contribute to the proposition expressed the object they pick out. So the truth-conditions are object-dependent although the proposition is general.

Worries of this kind motivate the idea that the claim that a thought is singular is not a claim about truth-conditions, but one that is best represented in a framework of structured propositions (Boër and Lycan, 1986, pp. 125–126). In turn, introducing an object in the proposition expressed requires thinking *directly* about the object. Tyler Burge says that a *de re* thought is a thought "whose correct ascription places the believer in an appropriate nonconceptual, contextual relation to objects the belief is about" (1977, p. 346). That is, singular thought requires *direct reference*. However, others argue that, on the contrary, entertaining a singular proposition about an object does not require thinking nonconceptually about it. Kent Bach, for instance, writes:

> Even *de re* thought about a current object of perception, which is direct as can be, is still mediated. In general, to think of an object in a *de re* way is to think of it via some means, but it is still to represent the object. (2010, p. 55)

In the same line, García–Carpintero (2010, p. 275 n. 4) argues that Burge's view is implausible: if there is no conceptual material involved, there is no genuine thinking whatsoever. Conceptual or descriptive mediation of the thought is still involved in entertaining singular thoughts, García–Carpintero maintains. As Recanati (2010, p. 148) puts it, both in case of a singular thought and in case of a general thought, the thought involves a *mode of presentation* of the object to the subject. The difference is that a descriptive mode of presentation consists of a set of satisfaction conditions, such that the object presented is whichever uniquely satisfies those conditions. A non-descriptive mode of presentation puts the subject in a special relation to the object, one that is grounded in a causal relation between the object and the subject.

Usually, both those who argue for unmediated directness and those who defend singular thought as conceptually mediated agree that a special relation must obtain between episodes of thinking that aim at certain objects and the objects they aim at, for the thought to be singular (i.e., for the "hitting" condition to be fulfilled). Following Russell (1911, 1912), this relation is sometimes called *acquaintance*.

Russell used the term to refer to a kind of relation between subject and object that is not conceptually mediated and is direct in an absolute sense. Acquaintance is a privileged epistemic relation between subject and object, such that the subject cannot be mistaken about what she is acquainted with. For Russell, acquaintance excludes any conceptual representation of the object, and so it also excludes any misrepresentation of it.

Most contemporary theorists think of acquaintance in a much less restrictive way than Russell did. It would be more accurate to talk of extended acquaintance, as McKay (2012) suggests. Some theorists follow Russell in understanding acquaintance in epistemic — but much more moderate — terms. Gareth Evans argues that "in order to be thinking about an object or to make a judgment about an object . . . one must know which object it is that one is thinking about" (1982, p. 64). Other authors, including Bach (2004, 2010), Burge (1977), Kaplan (1969), Recanati (2010, 2012) and Salmon (2010), take a different view. They use "acquaintance" to refer to an appropriate causal relation between subject and object, which is required to ground reference in language and thought. This is characterized as being in "a representational connection" (Bach, 2010, p. 58), or in "a real connection" (Salmon, 2010, p. 68) to an object. Direct perception of an object is one kind of such a causal relation, but not the only one. Most acquaintance theorists accept that we can refer in thought to objects that we do not perceive directly. They admit of perception-based acquaintance relations (such as having memory of a perception of an object), as well as of communication-based acquaintance relations (for instance, having reference passed to one through communication involving direct referential terms).

Not all theories that take singular thought to amount to entertaining a singular proposition impose an acquaintance requirement. Hawthorne and Manley (2012, pp. 24–25) call "liberal" all positions that reject an acquaintance constraint on singular thought. One such position is that of semantic instrumentalism, according to which entertaining a singular proposition requires identifying an object by description, and then using a linguistic device (such as Kaplan's [1970] "dthat" operator, or other descriptively introduced directly referential term) to directly refer to that individual. Thus, Kaplan argues that I can entertain a singular proposition about the first child to be born in the next century just by introducing in my vocabulary "Newman$_1$," a name that refers directly to whoever will be the first child to be born in the next century.[3]

Let us stop and sum up. I have so far briefly mentioned a number of RS theories of singular thought, according to which entertaining a singular thought amounts to entertaining a singular (object-involving) content. These theories focus primarily on

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[3]Kaplan later qualifies his view, reaching a more moderate position (see Kaplan, 1989, pp. 604–607).

question (ii), concerning the conditions for referential success. A different group of theories take question (i) to be the only relevant one for understanding the nature of singular thought. I call them referential fitness approaches to singular thought (RF approaches, for short). RF theorists typically argue that a thought may be singular even if it does not "hit" any object, that is, independently of whether reference in thought is secured or not. Such theories are in general uninterested in question (ii), concerning the conditions of referential success. Consequently, these theorists also disregard metaphysical questions concerning the existence of an individual the thought purports to be about.

  Both Sainsbury (2005) and Crane (2013) argue that a singular thought is a thought with singular content, but that this does not require referential success. As Crane (2013, p. 140) puts it, "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." For instance, I can have a singular thought about Vulcan (the alleged planet that the nineteenth century astronomer Le Verrier postulated and baptized, and which he thought explained certain perceived perturbations in the orbit of Mercury). Although the planet that Le Verrier postulated does not exist, on Crane's and Sainsbury's views I could entertain the singular thought that Vulcan has an elliptical orbit. I can never succeed in referring to Vulcan, but I can purport to refer to Vulcan because I have at my disposal the cognitive resources required to do so. In Sainsbury's (2005) view, the proposition entertained does not contain an object, but an individual concept. A concept may belong to this category even if it has no referent. It is the causal history of the concept that makes it an individual concept, rather than a descriptive one, and which determines what it is a concept of. Singular thought is thought that is formed by deploying individual concepts. Consequently, Sainsbury (2005, p. 240) denies that acquaintance, or any similar condition on referential success, needs to obtain for entertaining a singular thought.

  Another popular RF approach appeals to the concept of a "mental file," or a "mental dossier" to account for singular thought. The concept of mental files dates back to Grice (1969) and Bach (1987), and has been recently developed by Jeshion (2002, 2004, 2010), Recanati (2010, 2012), and others. These theorists account for the singularity of thought in terms of the cognitive organization of thoughts, and independently of what content these thoughts have. Mental files are not constituents of thoughts (they are not Fregean senses), but rather, ways in which the information a subject possesses is organized (Szabó, 2000, p. 53 n. 11). Hawthorne and Manley observe that, "On such a view, it is natural to hold that what makes a thought singular is a matter of how the content is represented, as opposed to the nature of the content itself" (2012, p. 17). The singularity of thought is explained by the cognitive role that the thought plays in the agent's mental organization. Cognition creates singular thoughts by creating mental files in which information related to a certain individual (real, imagined, or assumed to exist) is stored.

A thought is singular if it relies on the information contained in a particular mental file. It is "about" whatever individual the information in that mental file is about. As Jeshion notes,

> Singular thought about an individual is structured in cognition as a type of mental file.... 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. (2010, p. 129)

The Data for Singular Thought Revisited

In the previous section I briefly revisited various theories of singular thought with the purpose of drawing a general distinction between theories that require referential *success* for a thought to be singular (RS approaches) and theories that require only referential *fitness* (RF approaches). Notice that the distinction is not between theories that account for singular thought in terms of *content* vs. theories that account for singular thought in terms of cognitive aspects that relate to the *presentation of the content*, instead of the content itself. Sainsbury's theory of singular thought, for instance, relies on individual concepts, so it is a content theory, but at the same time it is an RF theory of singular thought. Other content theories, such as the acquaintance theories mentioned, are RS theories. Therefore, the RS vs. RF distinction is orthogonal with respect to the content vs. presentation of the content distinction. Needless to say, the latter distinction is equally useful. But it is the distinction between RS vs. RF approaches that serves my purpose here. I aim to suggest that both RS and RF theories have a role to play in accounting for the phenomenon of singular thought. In this section I develop an argument to support my claim. In particular, I consider the data relevant to theories of singular thought, and argue that it is best explained by a combination of RS and RF accounts.

First of all, notice that an RF theory of singular thought is compatible with the claim that singular thoughts may involve referential success, in which case their content is singular. But RF theories typically allow for singular thoughts to be formed by deploying, for instance, mental files that contain purely descriptive information. It is this latter point that RS theorists find unacceptable. Bach, for instance, thinks that a theory of mental files cannot explain singular thought:

> The file model can't explain singular thought itself, because it serves equally as a model for adding new beliefs to old beliefs "about" an individual we know of only by description, such as the last emperor of China, or even "about" a nonexistent individual, such as Bigfoot. (2010, p. 57)

Indeed, an RF mental file theory of singular thought typically allows for singular thoughts that have purely descriptive content. But is that an incorrect prediction? I want to suggest that it is not. It is useful at this point to take a closer look at some of the data that theories of singular thought purport to account for.

Theorists generally coincide in using the term "singular thought" to refer to a certain surface-level phenomenon, and agree on the theoretical goal to pursue, which is that of accounting for this phenomenon. There is broad agreement on how to characterize the surface-level phenomenon in general terms: as episodes of thinking that intuitively exhibit a singularity, or are *about* a particular individual. The data are sometimes presented in terms of "having in mind" (Donnellan, 1966; Wettstein, 2010) or "thinking of" a particular individual (Kaplan, 1969). These phrases are meant to trigger the intuition of singularity, or aboutness, or maybe directness, of thought. There is also agreement over paradigmatic cases that exhibit these features. However, there is a great range of cases over which there is no agreement. For many cases it is not at all clear whether we should say that the thought is singular or not. Other cases only trigger a weak intuition of singularity. To illustrate this point I consider three kinds of cases that fall in this category.

I. Reference by proxy. Also known as deferred reference, this is reference to an object that is absent from the context of utterance by way of exploiting its relation to some salient object present in the context. Many such cases of reference by proxy — including some of the ones discussed below — are, arguably, not genuine cases of successful reference at all. But what is relevant to our purposes here is not the question of whether there is referential success (i.e., whether the subject entertains a singular proposition), but the question concerning the *data* about intuitions of singularity. Do cases of reference by proxy trigger intuitions of singularity? Some cases do not. Consider Donnellan's scenario in which the detective, upon seeing the scene of Smith's assassination, utters, "Smith's murderer is insane." The detective does not have any particular suspect in mind (Donnellan, 1966, p. 288), and does not use the description as a means of referring to anyone (Donnellan, 1968, p. 205). But even if the detective had the intention to refer by proxy to Smith's actual murderer, he could not do so. There is widespread agreement in the literature that Donnellan is right in claiming that the detective is not in a position to entertain a singular thought about the murderer. Instead, the detective could only entertain a general thought, one about whoever killed Smith.

Other cases that are relevantly similar do trigger the intuition of singularity. I point at a nineteenth century photo of a bearded man who is totally unknown to me, and I utter, "He looks impressive." Intuitively, I manage to entertain a singular thought about the man in the photo. So, reference by proxy allows for clear intuitions of singularity. In this respect there is a marked contrast between this case and the previous one.

However, there are many other cases that are difficult to classify. Suppose that I am contemplating the same photo of the bearded man, this time in the context of a discussion of the artistic merits of various unknown photographers. While looking at the photo I utter: "He is very experienced," meaning that *the photographer* is very experienced. Do I entertain a singular thought about the unknown photographer now? It is not at all clear what we should say.

The fuzziness of the intuitions is mirrored at a theoretical level, as different theorists make, and defend, different predictions about such cases. Given that I have no idea who the photographer is, someone such as Evans (1982), who subscribes to an epistemic acquaintance requirement for singular thought, would deny that I could entertain a singular thought about the unknown photographer. Authors who are more liberal about the requirements for entertaining singular thoughts (e.g., Hawthorne and Manley, 2012; Sosa, 1970) allow for singular thoughts even when this kind of knowledge is lacking. After all, I clearly have a singular thought about the bearded man although I don't know who he is either. And I can very well say: "Whoever this man is, he looks impressive." A defender of the epistemic acquaintance view might reply that these cases are, after all, different. The photo allows us to identify the person in normal circumstances, but the authorship of the photo does not. But whatever we say about this particular case, many more difficult cases remain. What about a photo in which a person is showing her back to the camera? What if all I can see is her right hand? Or only her shadow? Or her fingerprint? Or a strand of hair? In which of these cases am I in a position to form a singular thought about that person?

It is tempting, when faced with difficulties of this kind, to bring oneself to a liberal frame of mind so as to admit that in *all* these cases the subject entertains a singular thought. But this temptation will be quickly abandoned, as it is easy to find cases for which not even the most liberal would assent to this conclusion. Is our liberal willing to accept that I can think a singular thought about the sixteenth person who touched the photo after it was produced, whoever she or he is? This seems too much to take. However, that person *is* causally related to the photo — although the causal effect on it may be imperceptible — and so, indirectly, to me. However, the same mechanism of reference by proxy could be deployed as in the case of the photographer. So it is not at all clear why we should say "yes" in one case and "no" in the other. The lesson to draw is that the data from such cases of reference by proxy are far from clear. Arguably, we only have a *weak* intuition of singularity for such cases, but not a strong one.

II. Specific uses of definite and indefinite descriptions. It is uncontroversial that I can grasp singular thoughts through communication, a paradigmatic example being communication that involves proper names (Kripke, 1980, pp. 91–93). In such cases the intuitions of singularity are fairly strong. Consider now the following case: my friend tells me a story about the adventures of her uncle, whom I have never met or seen. Furthermore, suppose she is not mentioning his name, or using any other referential expression that would guarantee the singularity of the content expressed. She only refers to him by using the description, "my uncle." Am I in a position to have a singular thought about my friend's uncle? Again, in as much as we consider the raw data from intuitions, there is no clear answer to this question. While we might be inclined towards singularity, the intuition is surely a weak one.

Consider a similar case, this time involving the use of an indefinite description. My friend tells me, "A policeman told me to turn left." She gives me no further information about the policeman she talked to. Do I have a singular thought about that policeman when I think that *he* must have been confused if he sent my friend in that direction? Ludlow and Neale (1991, pp. 180–181) classify such uses of indefinite descriptions as *specific*, as opposed to referential or attributive uses (Donnellan, 1966). The authors characterize them as cases in which only the speaker — but, crucially, not the addressee — is in a position to associate a particular individual to the description and think a singular thought about him or her. The specific use of an indefinite description does not allow for the communication of singular thoughts. That is, according to Ludlow and Neale (1991), I am not in a position to entertain singular thoughts about the policeman my friend talked to. However, this diagnosis may be resisted. The data are sufficiently unclear to allow for disagreement. One might insist that there is a causal chain that I can trace between the policeman and myself, and this causal chain is sufficient to allow me to think *of* that policeman in particular. However, the intuition of singularity in this case is definitely not a strong one.

III. Reference to "non-existent objects." Certain thoughts about non-existent individuals also exhibit intuitions of singularity. Consider again the proper name "Vulcan." We now know that the planet Le Verrier postulated does not exist, and so the name fails to refer. Should we say that Le Verrier expressed and entertained a singular thought when he assertively uttered, "Vulcan has an elliptical orbit"? We are not inclined to say that the thought is purely general, but neither is it clearly singular. I suggest we should admit that there is only a weak intuition of singularity in such cases.

A similar point could be made about failure of demonstrative reference, as opposed to reference by a proper name. Suppose I am under the impression that there is someone in the corner of the room and I assertively utter, "That man over there must be drunk." I do not succeed in referring to anything with my use of the demonstrative, because no object that I demonstrate is a man. But when I sincerely utter the sentence, I am under the impression of entertaining a singular thought, and I do have an intuition of singularity.

Reference to fictional characters (e.g., Sherlock Holmes) and mythological beings (e.g., Santa Claus), as well as reference to future individuals (e.g., thinking about the conference we are preparing for the next autumn) are further cases that exhibit weak intuitions of singularity. I am not claiming that all these cases need to receive a uniform treatment. I am only suggesting that, in as much as we consider the pristine data coming from competent speakers' judgments uncontaminated by theoretical considerations (assuming something of that sort is possible to have in the case of the phenomenon of singular thought), these cases do not provide strong, but only weak, intuitions of singularity.

Rethinking the Data

I do not think there is any simple solution to these difficulties concerning the precise identification of the data for theories of singular thought. Given that surface-level data should be gathered before proceeding to theoretical inquiry into the nature of the phenomenon, the prospects look rather grim.[4] If the data reduce to a very limited range of paradigmatic cases for which the intuitions are solid, it might be that there is no interesting distinction to make between singular and general thought. However, it might be that the problem is simply that we have been trying to fit in the same mold all the cases discussed: cases for which the intuition is strong (paradigmatic examples of singular thought), and cases for which it is weak. I suggest distinguishing the cases that exhibit strong intuitions of singular thought (which usually involve immediate and direct perception of an object, memory of such a perception, communication with direct referential expressions, and maybe other cases as well) from cases for which the intuition that the thought is singular is much weaker (including many of the cases discussed in the previous section). Definitely the thoughts we have about objects we perceive directly provide stronger intuitions of singularity than those concerning the thoughts I might have about the author of the photo I am perceiving, or about my friend's uncle in the above scenario.

It may be replied that the distinction between weak and strong intuitions of singularity is too vague to be methodologically useful at all. Although it is indeed vague, the distinction is useful, as it allows us to think of the data in a novel and different manner. In particular, if we accept this distinction we are no longer compelled to consider as reliable data only those cases that are similar enough to paradigmatic cases of singularity (such as those involving direct perception). If the paradigmatic cases are taken to set the standard for singular thought, to which any case is implicitly compared in order to reach a verdict, then a great range of cases will simply not meet the standard. They will be difficult to judge, as they do not meet the standard of paradigmatic cases of general thought either. However, if we open the possibility of a class of cases that exhibit weak singularity, we can accommodate many of the difficult cases as a *sui generis* kind of data to be treated separately. At least some cases of reference by proxy, some cases of specific use of definite and indefinite descriptions, and some cases of reference to fictional characters or to future individuals exhibit an intuition of singularity, although a weak one. My thought is *about* this forthcoming conference, it is this forthcoming event

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[4]Not everybody thinks the data could be identified in a theory-independent way. Jeshion writes: "Considering that we are dealing with such highly abstract and theoretically entrenched notions as singular and descriptive thought, the thought experiment could not possibly test for 'pre-theoretical' intuitions" (2010, p.112). While it is indeed difficult to separate theoretical from pre-theoretical language, it is not impossible to do so. Jeshion does not tell us why the data could not be described in a theory-independent way. In fact, I have indicated above some ways in which this is standardly done.

that I have in mind and not that other; it is *this* character and not *that* one that did so and so, etc.

How to Divide the Explanatory Labor

The distinction between weak and strong intuitions is a first step towards dealing with the problem of the fuzzy data. In this section I take the next step, and argue that the distinction introduced at the level of the data becomes relevant at the level of the theoretical explanation of the data. My suggestion is that the explanation of strong intuitions of singularity need not be the same as that of weak intuitions. Indeed, observe that the cases in which the intuition is strong tend to be cases that involve referential success. On the other hand, cases in which the intuition of singularity is weak tend to be cases that involve reference failure. An RS theory of singular thought — for instance, the variety of an acquaintance theory that turns out to be best suited for the job — readily explains strong intuitions of singularity, as these cases tend to be such that the acquaintance requirement is fulfilled. But the chances of an RS approach to explain weak intuitions are slim, as in such cases no object-involving proposition is entertained.[5] For this reason, an RF theory of singular thought — for instance, a variety of Jeshion's mental file theory — looks more promising with respect to these cases. For in all weak cases of singularity the subject does purport to think about an individual identified one way or another (e.g., as the sixteenth person to have touched the photo I am perceiving now).

I am aware that these general claims require more detailed argumentation and analysis of the data than the space of this essay allows for. For that reason, the considerations I advance here should be taken as having a tentative and program-matic character. However, the three kinds of cases I have discussed in the second section suggest that the methodological approach I propose has several merits. Let us revisit them briefly. Cases of "reference" to fictional and mythological entities, to "non-existent objects" (such as Vulcan) and to future individuals are all plausibly treated as involving referential failure. While this is not the only way to treat these cases, it is surely a tenable position. We do not manage to secure reference because there is nothing there to refer to. Therefore, an RS theory of singular thought cannot explain the weak intuition of singularity these cases exhibit. But an RF approach, on which, for instance, singular thought is thought through a mental file, does account for the weak intuition. The subject opens a mental file on the individual she thinks "about," and uses it in cognition to organize the information she gathers concerning that individual. This explains the intuition of singularity of our thoughts about fictional characters (Jeshion, 2002, pp. 57, 67; 2004, pp. 608–612),

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[5]This is true for most acquaintance theories, although not for all RS theories. I ignore here implausibly liberal proposals, such as Kaplan's semantic instrumentalism, on which it is possible to entertain an object-involving proposition even in cases that exhibit very weak intuitions of singularity.

about future individuals (Jeshion, 2004, pp. 609–612), about non-existent individuals such as Vulcan (Jeshion, 2002, p. 58), or a child's singular thoughts about her imaginary friends (Jeshion, 2010, p. 136).

The examples discussed involving communication with specific uses of definite or indefinite descriptions, as well as some of the cases of reference by proxy, also exhibit weak intuitions of singularity. Although in these cases there is an individual that the subject purports to think about, arguably, in some of them, she fails to entertain an object-involving proposition. The "representational connection" (Bach, 2010, p. 58) is arguably too distant or indirect for the subject to secure reference to the object. Thus, an acquaintance theorist may argue that I fail to refer in thought to the photographer, or the sixteenth person that touched the photo, because the acquaintance requirement is not fulfilled.[6] Nevertheless, at least in some of these cases, I have suggested, there is a weak intuition of singularity. A mental file theory of singular thought promises to account for such acquaintanceless *de re* thoughts (Jeshion, 2010, pp. 126–127).

For the sake of clarity, let me emphasize that the dual approach to singular thought I propose disagrees with Jeshion's proposal (and in general with any RF theory of singular thought) in as much as the latter aims at accounting for *all* intuitions of singularity exclusively in terms of facts about referential fitness (such as initiating mental files and thinking through mental files). While RF approaches do a good job of explaining weak intuitions of singularity, they fail to explain why some intuitions are stronger than others. The approach I propose manages to explain this. It is to be expected that a thought that is referentially fit *and* referentially successful generates a stronger intuition of singularity (as the content is object-involving) than a thought that is referentially fit but not referentially successful. In the latter case the intuition is weakened by the awareness of precisely those facts that account for referential failure: either that the "relational connection" to the object is too indirect or somehow inappropriate, or that there is no object whatsoever to refer to. In cases such as that of the photographer, we realize that the individual is too remotely connected to the subject, and this realization diminishes the strength of the intuition of singularity. In cases of non-existent referents (e.g., Santa Claus), the intuition is weak because we know there is no object the thought could be about, no object we could have in mind, etc.

Notice also that in cases of reference failure the intuition is weak only if we *realize* that there is no object to refer to. Introspectively, when purporting to demonstratively

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[6]What conditions must the "representational connection" fulfill for referential success? It is the job of an RS theory to determine this. Similarly, it is part of the job description of an RF theory to tell us what cognitive mechanisms one must have and deploy in order to purport to refer. This way, an RF theory draws the line between weak singular thought and general thought. It may do this by introducing restrictions on the creation of mental files. Jeshion (2010), for instance, argues that an individual must be significant to the subject for the latter to initiate a mental file on that individual.

refer to the (inexistent) person in the corner of the room, I have a strong intuition of singularity as long as I am under the illusion that there is someone there. Similarly, the intuition of singularity of a believer in God is much stronger than the intuition of singularity of a non-believer. Both subjects have a mental file about God but they disagree over the content of their beliefs. Such cases introduce further complications in the account of weak and strong intuitions of singularity. The intuition is not always strong whenever the content is object-involving, and not always weak when the thought fails to refer. Awareness (or belief, whether true or false) of the existence or inexistence of the object the speaker purports to think about increases and, respectively, diminishes the strength of the intuition of singularity. The dual account of singular thought that I am suggesting provides the resources to account for these variations.

A third merit of the proposal I advance (apart from accounting for both weak and strong intuitions, as well as for the difference between them) is its theoretical economy. What makes the approach particularly attractive is that it does not require postulating new facts that are not otherwise theoretically motivated. There are good independent reasons to believe in both facts responsible for referential fitness (e.g., mental files, or individual concepts) and facts responsible for referential success (e.g., acquaintance conditions on referential success). For instance, the motivation for a theory of mental files is not primarily to explain singularity intuitions. Mental files are useful in accounting for our ability to track discourse referents (Recanati, 2012, pp. 172f; Szabó, 2000). And they are equally useful in offering a perspicuous psychological explanation of Frege puzzles, as they allow for a very fine-grained way of individuating singular thoughts (Hawthorne and Manley, 2012, p. 17).

Comparative Remarks

Let me end with a few comparative remarks about the historical antecedents of the present proposal. One classical approach that needs to be mentioned in this sense is Boër and Lycan (1986, pp. 125–134). The authors distinguish six different sorts of aboutness which they present in ascending order, from pure *de dicto* attitude to a strong sense of *de re* attitude. For grade 1 of aboutness (or *de dicto* aboutness) the believer's representation must contain a singular term (of any sort, including definite descriptions or quantifier expressions) that uniquely denotes one individual. For grade 2 of aboutness the requirement is that the expression in question must be rigid. For grade 3 the requirement includes, apart from rigidity, that there must be a causal "contact" between subject and object. Grade 4 requires direct reference. That is, it demands that the term must not pick out the object in virtue of uniquely satisfying a description, but in virtue of the causal chain that links the object to the subject. Grade 5 introduces an "epistemic intimacy requirement" on top of direct reference, which is fulfilled in cases of direct perception and also in cases of possessing (sufficient) descriptive information about the object. Grade 6 of aboutness requires knowledge by acquaintance in Russell's original sense.

This insightful and instructive analysis of the multiple sources of aboutness resembles to a certain extent the position I have developed above. However, Boër and Lycan refrain from concluding that the distinction between singular and general thought is a matter of degree. They write:

> Is there, now, a single distinction between attitudes *de dicto* and attitudes *de re*? Or has that distinction shattered into fragments corresponding to our various grades of aboutness? [….] To mark the traditional distinction in a well-motivated way we must look for a natural break in the series of grades of aboutness. And such a break is there — between grades 3 and 4. We saw that despite the causal connection that obtains in a case of type three … the mechanism of reference in that case involves descriptive material and role filling rather than the causal chain. Moreover, as we saw, a thought of grade 3 does not express a singular proposition … involving the thought's deno-tatum as a constituent. (Boër and Lycan, 1986, p. 131, italics in the original)

Although Boër and Lycan admit that referential success is not required for grades of aboutness inferior to grade 4, when it comes to "the traditional distinction" between *de re* and *de dicto*, they draw a strict line between grades 3 and 4. In this respect their approach resembles the one I have proposed. However, Boër and Lycan do not introduce a distinction between weak and strong intuitions of singularity. Arguably, Boër and Lycan's aboutness of grades 2 and 3 (and arguably some cases of grade 1) generate weak intuitions of singularity, while grade 4 and above (when the proposition entertained is object-involving) generate strong intuitions of singu-larity. If we interpret Boër and Lycan's talk of grades of aboutness along these lines, their proposal is a version of the approach I have suggested. A second difference between their account and mine is that they treat all cases of aboutness from the perspective of the content of the thought, while I have emphasized that RF theo-ries of singular thought might not make reference to the content of thoughts at all.

Another approach that bears important resemblances with the one proposed here is developed in Recanati (2012). Recanati draws a distinction between two kinds of singular thoughts: a thought-*vehicle* that is singular and a thought-*content* that is singular. He defends a mental file theory of singular thought, but combines it with an acquaintance requirement, as follows:

> Opening a mental file is sufficient to entertain a singular thought only in the sense of thought-*vehicle*. It is not sufficient to entertain a singular thought in the sense of thought-*content*. What are the conditions on successfully thinking singular thought-*contents*? I have argued that singular thoughts are fundamentally non-de-scriptive: their object is determined relationally, not satisfactionally. (Recanati, 2012, p. 169, italics in the original)

Singular thought-vehicles are thoughts exercised from mental files, and are possible to instantiate even in cases in which an acquaintance relation is not instantiated (Recanati, 2012, pp. 155–158). But in as much as the content is concerned, Recanati (2010, 2012) advocates an acquaintance theory of singular thought: "One may think a singular thought-vehicle even if one does not expect to be acquainted, but

to think a singular thought-content one must at least expect acquaintance and be right in one's expectation" (2012, p. 170).

Recanati's distinction between singular thought-content and singular thought-vehicle resembles the distinction between a thought that is referentially fit and a thought that is referentially successful. However, it is not identical with it. The distinction I have introduced is not one between content vs. presentation of content, as Recanati's is. Instead, it is a distinction between the facts that account for referential fitness vs. the facts that account for referential success. Therefore, Recanati's approach cuts the material offered by the data from intuitions of singularity in a different way than I have done above.

A further difference between Recanati's proposal and the present one concerns the methodological role of the distinction. Recanati does not tell us how the distinction he introduces between the two kinds of singular thoughts relates to the data concerning intuitions of singularity. I have suggested that the distinction between RS and RF theories plays a significant role in accounting for the difference in the strength of intuitions of singularity.

The assumption that the phenomenon of singular thought is a natural kind is almost ubiquitous in the literature. The authors just discussed are among the few exceptions. If this assumption were correct, then an account of singular thought should encompass all instances in which the relevant features are manifest. In this essay I have argued that the thoughts that exhibit the superficial feature of singularity might not form a unitary category. Instead, intuitions of singularity are either strong or weak, to a recognizable degree. Second, I have argued that the two kinds of intuitions are the result of very different deep-level phenomena. My suggestion is that it is wrong to suppose that all intuitions of singularity have the same source, and are to be accounted for by appealing to the same kind of facts. Thus, it is a fruitful theoretical option to allow for both RF and RS theories to be part of the explanation of the phenomenon of singular thought.

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