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(ANTI)-DESCRIPTIVISM, MENTAL FILES, AND THE COMMUNICATION OF SINGULAR THOUGHTS

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that singular thought about an object involves nondescriptive or *de re* ways of thinking of that object, that is, modes of presentation resting on contextual relations of 'acquaintance' to the object. Such modes of presentation I analyse as *mental files* in which the subject can store information gained through the acquaintance relations in question. I show that the mental-file approach provides a solution to a vexing problem regarding the communication of singular thoughts: If singular thoughts depend upon contextual relations to the objects of thought, how can they be communicated across contexts? What makes communication possible when the speaker and the addressee do not stand in the same contextual relations to the objects the speaker's thought is about?

Keywords: Singular thought. Descriptivism. Mental files. Communication.

(ANTI)-DESCRITIVISMO, ARQUIVOS MENTAIS E A COMUNICAÇÃO DE PENSAMENTOS SINGULARES

Resumo: Neste artigo, argumento que o pensamento singular sobre um objeto envolve modos de pensar não descritivos ou *de re* sobre este objeto, isto é, modos de apresentação fundados sobre relações contextuais de contato com o objeto. Eu analiso estes modos de apresentação como *arquivos mentais* nos quais o sujeito pode guardar informações adquiridas através das relações em questão. Eu mostro que esta abordagem de arquivos mentais fornece uma solução ao difícil problema da comunicação de pensamentos singulares: se pensamentos singulares dependem de relações contextuais com os objetos de pensamento, como eles podem ser comunicados através de diferentes contextos? O que torna possível a comunicação, quando o falante e o ouvinte não estão nas mesmas relações contextuais com os objetos sobre os quais porta o pensamento do falante?

Palavras chave: Pensamento singular. Descriptivismo. Arquivos mentais. Comunicação.

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1. SINGULARISM VS DESCRIPTIVISM

Descriptivism is the view that our mental relation to individual objects goes through properties of those objects. What is given to us are, first and foremost, properties whose worldly instantiation we are able to detect, and only indirectly objects. That is so because (according to the view) our knowledge of objects is mediated by our knowledge of their properties. Objects are given to us only qua instantiators of whatever properties we take them to have. On this view, my friend John is only given to me as the x who has all (or perhaps most of) the properties I take him to have: being my friend, being called 'John', having a certain appearance, having a certain history (e.g. having been my classmate in such and such years), and so on and so forth. Whoever has the relevant properties — assuming a single individual does — is John. Likewise, the computer I am typing on is the x that has the properties of being (or looking like) a computer, being in front of me, having been bought by me at such and such a place at such and such a time, being currently used by me for typing, and so on and so forth.

Since, according to Descriptivism, we live in a qualitative world of properties — a world where objects only have secondary or derivative status — it would be philosophically revealing if we purged our language of its singular terms, as Quine recommended (Quine 1960: 181-6). Thus regimented, our language would be able to express only so-called 'general propositions', i.e. propositions about properties, such as the proposition that every F is G , or the proposition that nothing is both F and G . Translated into such a descriptivist language, statements allegedly about individual objects turn out to express general propositions: 'a is G ' translates as 'the F is G ', and, as Russell pointed out, 'the F is G ' expresses a general proposition just like 'An F is G ', 'Every F is G ' or 'No F is G '.

In contrast to Descriptivism, Singularism holds that our thought is about individual objects as much as it is about properties.¹ Objects are given to us directly, in experience, and we do not necessarily think of them as the bearers of such and such properties (even though the properties of objects are revealed to us when we encounter them in experience). On this view the Quinean ‘elimination of singular terms’ is a bad idea. We can think of individual objects in two ways, according to Singularism. We can think of them directly, if we are acquainted with them in experience; or we can think of them indirectly, qua bearers of such and such properties. It can be maintained that the content of a ‘descriptive’ thought — a thought that is only indirectly about individual objects — is a general proposition, i.e. a proposition that involves only properties; but Singularism differs from Descriptivism in holding that, in addition to such thoughts, there are also *singular thoughts*: thoughts that are directly about individual objects, and whose content is a singular proposition — a proposition involving individual objects as well as properties.

To a large extent, the history of the philosophy of language and mind in the twentieth century centers around the debate between Singularism and Descriptivism. Analytic philosophy in England started with Russell’s and Moore’s advocacy of ‘direct realism’, a doctrine according to which we are directly acquainted with objects and properties in the world. Over the years, despite

¹ Descriptivism and Singularism as I am describing them are semantic/epistemological theses, not metaphysical theses. Thus to say, with Quine, that singular terms can be dispensed with is not to say that *the world* does not consist of objects. On the distinction between semantic and ontological Singularism, see Pérez Otero 2006: 260-64. As Pérez Otero emphasizes, Quine was an ontological singularist (or ‘particularist’), despite his descriptivism, while Kripke is a singularist on both counts.

radical changes in his doctrines, Russell kept opposing knowledge by acquaintance to knowledge by description. Russell's insistence on acquaintance and direct reference led him to reject Frege's sense/reference distinction, on the grounds that, if reference is mediated by sense, we lose the idea of direct acquaintance and succumb to Descriptivism (Hylton 2005). As I am about to argue (§2), this was Russell's major mistake. First, contrary to what Russell thought, Frege's distinction is not incompatible with Singularism (even though Frege himself had clear descriptivist tendencies); that we have learnt from the work of Gareth Evans, another major twentieth-century advocate of Singularism (Evans 1982, 1985; see also McDowell 1977 and 1984). Second, and more important, once you give up Frege's sense/reference distinction in favor of a monostratal semantics à la Russell, you are bound to embrace some form of Descriptivism: that is exactly what happened to Russell. After Russell himself became a Descriptivist, Descriptivism became the orthodoxy. It took decades before the community of analytic philosophers as a whole rediscovered Singularism and rejected Descriptivism.

2. RUSSELL'S MISTAKE

For Russell, knowledge is, or rests on, a direct relation between the mind and things outside the mind. This relation Russell calls 'acquaintance'. Without a direct relation of acquaintance between the mind and its objects, no genuine 'knowledge of the external world' would be possible, Russell thought. That is the doctrine of *direct realism*, which Russell and Moore opposed to neo-Hegelian idealism. This non-negotiable principle – that knowledge is based on a direct relation of acquaintance between the mind and its objects – leaves it open what exactly acquaintance amounts to, and in particular, which entities one can be acquainted with and which one cannot. But Russell thought that the principle of acquaintance

itself had semantic consequences, and that it was incompatible with Frege's doctrine about sense and reference.

Besides knowing objects, the mind knows truths about objects. Let us assume, as both Frege and Russell did in their discussion involving that example, that we know that Mont Blanc is 4000 metres high. Knowledge here is a relation between the mind and a 'proposition', namely, the (true) proposition that Mont Blanc is 4000 metres high. Frege and Russell agreed that the mind is related to propositions (in Frege's terminology: thoughts) which it 'grasps'; but they disagreed about the nature and constituency of such propositions. For Frege, a proposition about Mont Blanc does not involve Mont Blanc itself (the *reference* of the proper name 'Mont Blanc') but a mode of presentation of Mont Blanc (the *sense* of the proper name). For Russell, grasping and believing the proposition that Mont Blanc is 4000 metres high gives us knowledge about Mont Blanc only if Mont Blanc itself is a constituent of the proposition. If the proposition contains some mediating entity rather than the object itself, it will not be about the object in the strong sense which is required for knowledge. So, unless "Mont Blanc itself is a component part [of the proposition], ... we get the conclusion that we know nothing at all about Mont Blanc" (Letter to Frege, 12 December 1904, in Frege 1980: 169). Russell therefore advocated a one-level semantics, in which the meaning or content of a representation (whether linguistic or mental) is its reference, and nothing else. The meaning of a singular term is an individual object; the meaning of a predicate is a property or a relation; the meaning of a sentence is a proposition, that is, an 'objective complex' involving objects (if the proposition is singular) and properties or relations.

But as I said, that departure from Frege was a major mistake. Like Frege, Russell accepts that propositions are the content of attitudes such as belief. In order to play that role, propositions must obey certain obvious constraints. For example, it must *not* be

possible for a rational subject to believe and disbelieve one and the same proposition. But it is certainly possible for a rational subject looking at a particular mountain to believe that the mountain in question is less than 4000 metres high even though (i) that mountain is Mont Blanc, and (ii) the subject in question believes that Mont Blanc is 4000 metres high. Such a situation may happen if the subject does not realize that the mountain she is seeing is Mont Blanc. In that sort of case Frege is safe, for he can appeal to senses or modes of presentation: what the subject is said simultaneously to believe and disbelieve is not one and the same proposition (viz. the proposition that a given mountain is 4000 metres high) but two distinct propositions, involving two distinct modes of presentation of what turns out to be the same mountain. The subject believes of that mountain under mode of presentation m_1 that it is less than 4000 metres high, and of the same mountain under mode of presentation m_2 that it is 4000 metres high. Since $m_1 \neq m_2$, there is no irrationality on the subject's part. Russell, however, is forced to say that the subject holds contradictory beliefs. Since, in his framework, no senses go into the proposition believed, but only the mountain itself (the same in both cases), he cannot avoid the conclusion that the subject simultaneously believes and disbelieves the proposition consisting of the mountain in question and the property of being 4000 metres high.

At this point two rescue options are available but they are both deeply unattractive. The first option consists in denying that propositions understood à la Russell — *R*-propositions, for short — are the complete content of the attitudes, i.e. that in terms of which we should account for the subject's rationality. On this option, *R*-propositions are said to be believed or disbelieved only under guises. This option, which has been pursued by some philosophers in the so-called 'neo-Russellian' camp, amounts to a concession of defeat; for guises are nothing but modes of presentation, and modes of

presentation are now allowed to enter into finer-grained propositions construed as the *complete* content of the attitudes. Far from conflicting with Frege's construal of propositions as involving senses, this view merely introduces a new, coarser-grained notion of 'proposition', namely *R*-propositions, playing a different role and corresponding roughly to an equivalence class of Fregean propositions. This is a variant of Frege's two-level approach rather than a genuine alternative of the sort Russell was after. In any case, Russell himself insisted that propositions in his sense – *R*-propositions – *are* the object of the attitudes and should therefore be answerable to considerations of cognitive significance. There is no difference between Russellian propositions and Fregean propositions on this score. This means that the option I have just sketched was not really available to Russell.

The other option is what Russell went for. It consists in maintaining the general principle of direct reference, while giving up its application to the case at hand (and to any case that raises the same sort of objection). So, in the Mont Blanc case, contrary to what Russell initially thought, the subject does *not* hold a belief that is about Mont Blanc in the strong and direct sense which he was interested in characterizing. The fact that the subject is disposed to ascribe contradictory predicates to one and the same mountain shows that she thinks of that mountain under distinct guises, hence that her beliefs are only indirectly about the mountain. What the subject really believes, in the above scenario, are the following propositions: that *the mountain she is seeing* is less than 4000 metres high, and that *the mountain known as 'Mont Blanc'* is 4000 metres high. These propositions contradict each other only given the extra premiss that the mountain the subject is seeing is the mountain known as 'Mont Blanc'. In the case at hand, precisely, the subject does not believe the extra premiss, so her rationality is preserved. As for Russell, his theoretical position is also preserved: he can maintain

that, for the subject to entertain a singular belief about an object *a*, *a* must be a component part of the proposition which she believes. In our scenario the propositions believed by the subject only involve properties such as the property of being currently seen by the subject or the property of being known as 'Mont Blanc'; they do not involve Mont Blanc itself. It follows that the subject does *not* hold a singular belief about Mont Blanc, appearances notwithstanding. She holds only general beliefs about whatever mountain she is seeing, or whatever mountain is called 'Mont Blanc'. The subject's thought concerns Mont Blanc only indirectly, via descriptions such as 'the mountain I see' or 'the mountain called *Mont Blanc*'; and the same thing is true whenever the subject is disposed to ascribe contradictory predicates to some object her thought is, in some loose sense, 'about'. Russell is thus led to hold that we are acquainted with, and can directly refer to, only a very limited number of individual objects: objects that are given to us *in such a transparent manner that no identity mistake can arise*. The list of such objects is rather short: ourselves, or our sense data, are the candidates that come to mind. The *other* things — ordinary objects like Mont Blanc, this chair, or my friend John — we know only 'by description', via properties which these objects possess and with which we *are* acquainted.

For a singularist that option is a disaster. It enables Russell to maintain the contrast between the two kinds of knowledge – direct and indirect, by acquaintance or by description – only by so drastically limiting the first kind that Russell now appears as the champion of Descriptivism. On the resulting view, almost all of our knowledge of individual objects is knowledge by description. The most typical sort of knowledge of objects by acquaintance, namely perceptual knowledge (such as the knowledge one gains of Mont Blanc when one sees the peak), now counts as knowledge by description. Defeat has not been conceded, since the idea of

acquaintance remains (and acquaintance still is the foundation for all our knowledge); but defeat has taken place nonetheless. In contrast to our knowledge of the internal world, our knowledge of the external world – our knowledge of the mountains and chairs around us – is indirect, descriptive knowledge based on properties. Descriptivism rules.

The disaster could have been avoided. For Frege's two-level semantics, far from entailing the indirectness of all our knowledge, was in fact the surest way of protecting Singularism from cognitive significance objections of the sort Russell's Singularism succumbed to. Let me spell this out.

First, Frege's two-level semantics does not entail the indirectness of all our knowledge, because it is possible to make room for *non-descriptive senses*, i.e. senses that are acquaintance-based. On the 'neo-Fregean' approach advocated by Evans and others, there is a basic distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, as in Russell's approach. When I see the mountain, I get acquainted with it. But this does not mean that the mountain is not presented to me in a particular way, distinct from other ways it might be presented to me. In experience, we are acquainted with objects, but this is compatible with there being modes of presentation under which we are acquainted with them. What follows from the contrast between the two kinds of knowledge is not the lack of any mode of presentation in the acquaintance case, but only the lack of any *descriptive* mode of presentation. Russell's claim that a two-level semantics à la Frege is incompatible with Singularism therefore depends upon an overly narrow, descriptivist construal of 'sense', a construal that was encouraged by Frege himself but which was by no means mandatory.

Second, once we have acquaintance-based senses in addition to the objects of acquaintance (the referents), cognitive significance

objections are powerless to threaten Singularism. It is no longer possible to claim that the subject is not in direct contact with the object, on the grounds that identity mistakes are possible. Identity mistakes admittedly presuppose that the object is given to the subject under varying modes of presentation, but the object's being given under a mode of presentation no longer entails that it is not given 'directly'. Modes of presentation are now construed as *ways the object is given to the subject*, and an object may be given either directly, in experience, or indirectly, via descriptions. Nondescriptive modes of presentation are ways the object is (directly) given to the subject in experience, while descriptive modes of presentation are ways the object is (indirectly) given via properties which it uniquely instantiates. When, facing Mont Blanc, the subject thinks 'That mountain is less than 4000 metres high', she thinks of Mont Blanc under a nondescriptive mode of presentation based on her perceptual relation to Mont Blanc. Such a mode of presentation presupposes acquaintance and can only be grasped by a subject who is suitably related to the object the thought is about. When the subject thinks 'The tallest mountain in Europe is 4000 metres high', her thought is about Mont Blanc only in a weaker, indirect sense: she now thinks of Mont Blanc under a descriptive mode of presentation, and the resulting thought is one that can be grasped even if one is not acquainted with Mont Blanc. The neo-Fregean framework therefore enables us to maintain the basic contrast which Russell's one-level semantics forced him to give up: that between a demonstrative thought such as 'That mountain is less than 4000 metres high', which is singular and can only be grasped if one is suitably acquainted with the mountain, and a descriptive thought like 'The tallest mountain in Europe is 4000 metres high' which is general in nature and sets no such acquaintance requirement.

The idea of 'directness' turns out to be ambiguous. 'Direct reference' can mean that the only meaning or content of a

representation is its reference, to the exclusion of any sense or mode of presentation, as in Russell's one-level semantics; or it can mean, as in singularist frameworks, that the subject is directly acquainted with the object in experience and does not think of it descriptively as the instantiator of such and such property. The two ideas are clearly independent, and it was a mistake on Russell's part to argue from Singularism to the rejection of Frege's two-level approach. I call it a major mistake because I think Russell's one-level semantics is what killed Singularism by letting it succumb to cognitive significance objections.

3. NONDESCRIPTIVE MODES OF PRESENTATION AS MENTAL FILES

Nondescriptive modes of presentation can be analysed in terms of mental files (Bach 1987: 34-37; Forbes 1990: 538-45; Recanati 1993, chapters 7, 10 & 15). The relevant idea of a mental file or 'dossier', introduced rather incidentally by Grice in connection with referential descriptions (Grice 1969: 140), has been subsequently exploited by several authors, including Evans (1982: 276). The first detailed articulation of the idea is due to Peter Strawson (1974: 54-56), but the most influential source for the notion is probably Perry (1980: 84-89), who credits Donnellan for the basic inspiration. Similar notions have been introduced into linguistics at about the same time to deal with anaphora,² and into cognitive science shortly afterwards in connection with perception and attention.³ I take it that, between these various uses of the file

² See e.g. Karttunen 1976, Reinhart 1981, and Heim 1983, 1988. (Heim [1988: 404] says of the file metaphor, which "must have been used many times before", that it was brought to her attention by Angelika Kratzer.) See also Erteschik-Shir 1997.

³ See e.g. Treisman 1988, 1992, Kahneman and Treisman 1984, Kahneman, Treisman & Gibbs 1992. In Recanati 1993 I mentioned

metaphor, there are nonaccidental connections that are well worth exploring (see Recanati 2005: 293-4 and Recanati forthcoming: §9).

The main idea behind the file metaphor as I use it is the following. In his cognitive life the subject encounters various objects to which he stands in various contextual relations. Some of these relations — the acquaintance relations — are epistemically rewarding in that they enable the subject to gain information from the object.⁴ For example, by holding an object in my hand, I can get information about its weight. By looking at it I can get information about its visual appearance. The role of a mental file based on a certain acquaintance relation is to store information acquired in virtue of that relation. Such a file will typically be a *temporary* file because it exists only as long as the relation (hence the possibility of gaining information about the object by exploiting the relation) exists. So, as long as I am in the right type of perceptual contact with Mont Blanc, I can think of it demonstratively. When I am no longer in a position to perceive it or to focus my attention on it, I can no longer think of it under the demonstrative mode of presentation

Treisman's work and its interest for the theory of reference. On the cognitive underpinning of singular thought, there now is a growing body of literature, which clearly supports Singularism: see e.g. Clarke (2000: Chapter 4), Pylyshyn (2007), and Scholl (2002).

⁴ The paradigm is, of course, perceptual acquaintance, but the notion of acquaintance can be generalized "in virtue of the analogy between relations of perceptual acquaintance and other, more tenuous, relations of epistemic rapport. There are relations that someone bears to me when I get a letter from him, or I watch the swerving of a car he is driving, or I read his biography, or I hear him mentioned by name, or I investigate the clues he has left at the scene of his crime. In each case there are causal chains from him to me of a sort which would permit a flow of information. Perhaps I do get accurate information; perhaps I get misinformation, but still the channel is there. I call such relations as these *relations of acquaintance*" (Lewis 1999: 380-81).

since the latter involves the activation of a mental file which depends upon the existence of the right type of perceptual relation. When the relation is broken, the temporary file based on it disappears. (The information in the file is not lost, of course, but transferred into other files.)

In this framework there is an array of acquaintance relations, and among them, some are distinguished by the fact that certain types of file specifically correspond to them. One particular case of that sort is the SELF file. According to Perry (2000), the concept of self is a type of mental file that is based upon a special relation which every individual bears to himself or herself, namely identity. In virtue of *being* a certain individual, I am in a position to gain information concerning that individual in all sorts of ways in which I can gain information about no one else, e.g. through proprioception and kinaesthesia. The mental file SELF serves as repository for information gained in this way. Note that this is not the only sort of information about oneself that can go into the file. There is much information about myself that I cannot get in the first person way, e.g. through proprioception or introspection. Information about my date of birth is a case in point: when I was born is something I learn through communication, in the same way in which I learn my parents's birthdates. That information goes into my SELF file, however, because I take it to concern the same person about whom I also have direct first-person information, i.e. myself. So a file based on a certain acquaintance relation contains two sorts of information: information gained in the special way that goes with that relation (first-person information, in the case of the SELF file), and information not gained in this way but concerning the same individual as information gained in that way.

Not all files are based on specific contextual relations enabling us to gain information about the referent in particular ways. Some files (the *indexical* files) are based on specific contextual relations,

such as one's relation of identity to oneself or the relation to what we hold in our hand, but others (the *encyclopedic* files) are based on a more general-purpose tracking relation. Thus my file about Mont Blanc contains all the information I can get about the mountain, *however it is gained*. It is not tied to a particular way of gaining information, nor to a specific acquaintance relation. An encyclopedic file may exploit a number of acquaintance relations to the reference of the file, in an opportunistic manner, instead of being based on a single one. Any relation will do, provided it preserves the link to the object. In this case, what determines the reference of the file is the overarching tracking relation: the relation between the file and the object it has been created to track (however it *is* tracked). Not being based on a specific acquaintance relation, an encyclopedia entry is not short-lived, as the other type of file typically is.⁵ It survives when our contextual relation to the reference changes.

Whether it is indexical or encyclopedic, a file contains all the predicates which the subject takes the referent of the file to satisfy. The referent need not actually satisfy the predicates in the file, since the subject may be quite mistaken. Such mistakes are possible because what determines the reference is not the content of the file but the relevant relation to the object. The file corresponds to an information channel, and the reference is the object from which the information derives, whether that information is genuine information or misinformation.

Among the predicates in a file, some have the distinguishing property that they are 'singular', i.e. they are supposed to be satisfied by a unique object. '(The) tallest mountain in Europe' is a case in point. That's a predicate which my Mont Blanc file contains, along

⁵ The SELF file is an exception: it's an indexical file that is not short-lived. Recognitional concepts are also an exception in this regard (Recanati 2006: 251-2).

with other predicates such as ‘called Mont Blanc’ or ‘4000 metres high’, but it differs from these predicates in being singular (Table 1).

Mont Blanc

- Called ‘Mont Blanc’
- 4000 metres high
- the tallest mountain in Europe
- not as high as Mount Everest
- used as an example in the Frege-Russell correspondence

Table 1: my Mont Blanc file

Singular predicates, when they occur in a thought, are what I call descriptive modes of presentation. A singular predicate ‘the F ’ denotes whatever possesses the property F if a single object does, and nothing otherwise.⁶ Descriptivism holds that, in *prima facie* singular thought, we exercise descriptive modes of presentation, whose denotation is determined satisfactorily.⁷ In contrast, I hold that we do not think of objects in this manner when we entertain a singular thought: we think of them under nondescriptive modes of

⁶ A singular predicate ‘the F ’ corresponds to a partial function from situations to individuals. With respect to any situation in which there is a unique F , the function returns that object as value. The function is undefined for all situations in which there is no F or more than one.

⁷ ‘Satisfactorily’ comes from Bach 1987: “Since the object of a descriptive thought is determined SATISFACTORILY, the fact that the thought is of that object does not require any connection between thought and object. However, the object of a *de re* thought is determined RELATIONALLY. For something to be the object of a *de re* thought, it must stand in a certain kind of relation to that very thought.” (Bach 1987: 12; see also Bach 1986: 188-9 and the references therein, especially Burge 1977.)

presentation. What are these nondescriptive modes of presentation? My answer is that they are mental files. To entertain a singular thought about an object a is to activate a mental file based upon some acquaintance relation with a , for example the above Mont Blanc file. In such a case, the mode of presentation is not constituted by the properties which the thinker takes the referent to have (i.e. the properties represented in the file) but, rather, by the file itself. The file is what plays the role which Fregean theory assigns to modes of presentation. In the Fregean framework, modes of presentation provide a solution to the following puzzle: A rational subject can think of a given object a both that it is and that it is not F — how can that be? Frege solved the problem by appealing to modes of presentation over and above the objects thought about. A rational subject can believe of a , thought of under a mode of presentation m , that it is F , and at the same time believe of the same object a , thought of under a different mode of presentation m' , that it is not F . Insofar as the modes of presentation are distinct, there is no irrationality. On the present understanding, modes of presentation are mental files: in all the relevant instances (e.g. Quine's 'Orcutt' example, or Kripke's puzzle about belief), the subject has two distinct files about one and the same object, and that is what enables him or her to ascribe contrary predicates to that object without (internal) contradiction.

4. THE COMMUNICATION OF SINGULAR THOUGHTS

The fact that nondescriptive modes of presentation are mental files, while descriptive modes of presentation are singular predicates which may occur as part of the content of mental files, is the key to solving a number of standing difficulties in the theory of singular thought. In the last section of this paper, I will focus on one particular difficulty: the communication of singular thoughts (Recanati 1995).

Consider indexicals or definite descriptions. They both have a certain descriptive meaning, corresponding to the ‘character’ in the case of indexicals, and to the encoded singular predicate in the case of a definite description. The character of an indexical – at least in the case of pure indexicals – itself can be construed as a singular predicate (something like ‘the speaker’, in the case of ‘I’, or ‘the hearer’ in the case of ‘you’). But that singular predicate is not what the expression contributes to the thought expressed. If it did, the thought would be descriptive rather than singular. What the expression contributes, I suggest, is the mental file to the content of which the predicate belongs. So the speaker expresses a thought with his own SELF file as a constituent, when he says ‘I’. The word ‘I’ expresses the singular predicate ‘the speaker’, but that predicate is contained in the speaker’s SELF file (since the speaker is conscious of being the speaker) and it stands for the whole file to the content of which it belongs.

When the hearer processes the speaker’s utterance, the same singular predicate ‘the speaker’ evokes, in the hearer’s mind, the hearer’s mental file containing that predicate, and that file is the hearer’s file about the person speaking to him. So, in understanding the speaker’s utterance, the hearer forms a singular thought about the speaker that matches the thought expressed by the speaker since both thoughts have the same singular truth-conditions, but differs from that thought in that the (nondescriptive) modes of presentation they involve are distinct for the speaker and for the hearer: the speaker thinks of the referent of ‘I’ as being himself — he exercises his SELF concept — while the hearer thinks of the referent of ‘I’ in a third person way.

Any theory of singular thought has to account for their communication and for the fact that, in crucial cases such as the communication of ‘I’ thoughts, the hearer is simply *not* in a position to entertain the thought which the speaker expresses. As Frege puts it,

Every one is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else. So, when Dr. Lauben thinks that he has been wounded, he will probably take as a basis this primitive way in which he is presented to himself. And only Dr. Lauben himself can grasp thoughts determined in this way. But now he may want to communicate with others. He cannot communicate a thought which he alone can grasp. (Frege 1918-19: 66)

So what can Dr Lauben do? Frege's answer is well-known:

If he now says 'I have been wounded', he must use the 'I' in a sense which can be grasped by others, perhaps in the sense of 'he who is speaking to you at this moment'... (Frege 1918-19: 66)

In other words, we must distinguish the *linguistic* mode of presentation associated with 'I' (the singular predicate 'the speaker' or 'he who is speaking at this moment') from the *psychological* mode of presentation that occurs in the speaker's thought (i.e. the speaker's SELF concept, which only he can use in thinking about himself).⁸ The linguistic mode of presentation associated with 'I' is the same for speaker and hearer, but psychological modes of presentation exhibit no such constancy: because the speaker and the hearer do not stand in the same contextual relations to the speaker, the hearer cannot use the speaker's own psychological mode of presentation in thinking about the speaker — he cannot entertain the speaker's 'I' thought. The hearer can only think of the speaker under a *third person* mode of presentation. The role of the linguistic mode of presentation conventionally associated with 'I' is precisely to provide some kind of bridge between the psychological modes of presentation respectively occurring in the speaker's and the hearer's thoughts. On my story, which elaborates on Frege's suggestion, the

⁸ The distinction between linguistic and psychological modes of presentation was introduced in Recanati 1990 and subsequently elaborated in Recanati 1993.

singular thoughts respectively associated with the utterance ‘I have been wounded’ by Lauben (the speaker) and by his hearer Leo Peter both involve nondescriptive modes of presentation of Lauben (the reference of ‘I’). These modes of presentation are distinct, but they have something in common which makes communication possible⁹: these modes of presentation are mental files, and both the speaker’s mental file for himself and the hearer’s mental file for the speaker contain the piece of information ‘the speaker’ that is encoded by the word ‘I’. This means that the singular predicate encoded by an indexical *stands for the mental file to which it belongs*: what the thought contains is the mental file (a nondescriptive mode of presentation) rather than the singular predicate whose role is merely to stand for the file. Again, if the thought contained the singular predicate, the referent would be thought of descriptively rather than nondescriptively.

The same sort of story applies to definite descriptions. The singular predicate encoded by a description may be what the description contributes to the thought expressed by the speaker (attributive use), but it may also stand for some file to which it belongs (referential use). Consider Donnellan’s famous example:

One is at a party and, seeing an interesting-looking person holding a martini glass, one asks, “Who is the man drinking a martini?” If it should turn out that there is only water in the glass, one has nevertheless asked a question about a particular person, a question that it is possible for someone to answer. (Donnellan 1966: 48)

In this example, the singular predicate ‘the man drinking a martini’ stands for a demonstrative file based upon the speaker’s acquaintance relation to the interesting-looking person he sees holding a martini

⁹ Of course their reference is common, but that is not enough for communication. See the example due to Loar 1976 and discussed in Recanati 1993: 53-58.

glass. In that demonstrative file, the speaker stores information gained through the acquaintance relation, such as the information that the referent (the man he is watching) holds a martini glass and, presumably, drinks a martini. By using the description referentially, the speaker expresses a demonstrative thought about that man — a thought involving his demonstrative file as a constituent. On the hearer's side, the same mechanism is at work: the singular predicate 'the man drinking a martini' readily evokes for the hearer her own file about the presumed martini-drinker. If there is no preexisting file containing the singular predicate in the mind of the hearer, but she takes the speaker to express a singular thought, she will put herself in the right epistemic position by looking in the same direction as the speaker and *acquiring* a demonstrative file about the man holding the martini glass, which file will make it possible for her to entertain a singular thought about the man in question in order to understand what the speaker is saying.

In theories of direct reference couched in a two-dimensional framework, the referential/attributive distinction is typically accounted for by saying that a singular predicate determines a function from situations to individuals, which function can apply either to the context (referential use) or to the circumstance of evaluation (attributive use). Indexicals are such that the singular predicate they are conventionally associated with — their character — can only apply to the context. (In the terminology of Recanati 1993, they are 'type-referential', while definite descriptions are 'token-referential': they can, but need not, be referentially used.) When the function determined by the singular predicate applies to the context rather than the circumstance, the predicate only has a 'reference-fixing' role and the content expressed by the utterance is singular. This account is, basically, Kaplan's and Stalnaker's (see Kaplan 1978 and Stalnaker 1970). It has elicited criticism on the part

of some neo-Russellians who thought this relies too much on a descriptivist mechanism. Thus Genoveva Marti writes:

What defines a referential use of a definite description, or of any device, is... the absence of a semantic mechanism to search for and determine the referent... If a definite description can be used as a device of direct reference in this sense, the attributes associated with it should not play a role in the determination of reference. Therefore, if a definite description 'the F' can be used referentially, in the strong sense, it must be possible to use it to refer to an object independently of whether that object satisfies the attributes associated with 'the F'. And that's the characteristic mark of referential uses of descriptions according to Donnellan. (Marti 2008: 49)

I think Marti is right: the anti-descriptivist thrust of early theories of direct reference such as Donnellan's is lost if we say that the singular predicate encoded by a referentially used description or an indexical 'fixes the reference' of the expression. Two-dimensional descriptivism is still descriptivism (Recanati forthcoming: §3). The mental-file account preserves the original inspiration of direct reference theories in giving pride of place to acquaintance relations and in downplaying satisfactoriness factors. According to the account, a referentially used description refers to what the mental file containing the encoded predicate is about, and the file is about the entity to which it is appropriately related. That entity may or may not satisfy the singular predicate. In Donnellan's example, 'the man drinking a martini', the singular predicate does not even fix the reference since the reference does not satisfy the predicate.*

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(corresponding to roughly the second half of the paper) in the interdisciplinary workshop 'Context and Attention' he and Maria Luiza Cunha Lima organized in Belo Horizonte in December 2008.

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