

Getting a thing into a thought

KENT BACH

kbach@sfsu.edu

<http://online.sfsu.edu/~kbach>

Philosophers have a way of making the obvious seem absurd, the pervasive seem problematic, and the actual seem impossible. They deny, or at least raise grave doubts about or else render paradoxical, such things as causality and change, consciousness and free will, and knowledge of material objects. They use smoke and mirrors, I mean powerful arguments, to do this. Take the case of singular thought.

1. A problem?

It seems undeniable that we have singular thoughts about things in the world. If we didn't, our view of the world would be entirely qualitative. We would never be related in thought to anything in particular. From our perspective at any particular time, we could think that there exists a unique thing of a certain sort at a certain place, but the particular thing of that sort would never enter into the picture. Our knowledge of physical things would be, as Russell might say, only by description, or, as a psychiatrist might say, only by proxy.

But it also seems puzzling how we *could* have singular thoughts about things in the world. Consider, for example, how Frege resisted Russell's suggestion that Mont Blanc, with its rocks and its snowfields, is a constituent of the proposition that Mont Blanc is more than 4000 meters high. After all, how could Mont Blanc itself, or any material object for that matter, be part of a thought? How could we literally have an object *in mind*? I don't know how Russell responded to Frege, but in *The Problems of Philosophy* he wrote, "the

notion of being ‘in’ the mind is ambiguous. We speak of bearing a person in mind, not meaning that the person is in our minds, but that a thought of him is in our minds” (1912, 40). That’s not much help. It seems to imply that thoughts do not literally contain objects but merely representations of objects. Even though a thought is a mental occurrence, constituents of the *content* of a thought are not constituents of that occurrence. So there is nothing inherently paradoxical about having an object in mind, at least no more than having a property or a relation in mind. But still, maybe there’s something puzzling about it.

To appreciate this puzzle about singular thought, first consider the analogous puzzle about perception. Here I am, looking at this pen [I hold up a pen]. Presumably I really see it. Even so, I could be having an experience just like the one I am having even if some other pen, or even a non-pen, or even nothing at all were there. It seems as though the presence of the pen is inessential to the way the experience is. This raises what I call the “problem of particularity” (J. J. Valberg called it, in the title of his 1992 book, the “puzzle of experience”). Had another pen been in the place of this one, the other pen would have been the one I’m experiencing. Had this pen been replaced instantaneously by another, the other pen would have immediately become the one I’m experiencing. If the pen suddenly vanished but my visual and tactual experiences remained the same, there would now be no pen that I’m experiencing. Traditional epistemologists, even unskeptical ones, used such considerations to argue that all we ever directly perceive are sense-data, but that’s not the conclusion here. The worry is that I’m not really aware of *this pen* (as looking to me to be in front of me and to be of such-and-such shape, size, and color). Rather, I experience *that there exists* a thing of a certain sort. Since there is nothing special about this case, the conclusion is that the contents of all perceptual experiences can only be general, that their (physical) objects can’t figure in their contents.

Surely, though, when we perceive something, we are aware of *it*, and not just that there exists a unique thing of a certain sort. It’s not like seeing a shadow or a footprint, when we

are not aware of the person that casts the shadow or left the footprint . Seeing someone's shadow enables us to think of the person who casts it only under a description like "the person that is casting this shadow." Seeing a footprint enables us to think of the person who left it only under some such description as "the person who left this footprint." In those cases, the person does not seem to be perceptually present, even if the footprint or the shadow is. The person is, of course, causally relevant to the experience, by causing the footprint or the shadow and, indeed, is informationally relevant, but our knowledge of the person, at least in virtue of this visual experience, is only by description. Similarly, if we saw an ink-stained shirt pocket, our knowledge of the leaky pen that caused it would be only by description. But here's the problem: how can we do better by experiencing the pen itself rather than just the ink stain? John Searle states the problem nicely (1983: 63): "What is it about this experience that requires that it be satisfied by the presence of [this pen] and not just by any [pen] with such and such characteristics type identical with [this one]?"

I'll get back to the problem of particularity later. For now I just wanted to have a vivid analogy to the problem of singular thought, although in relevant respects they are pretty much the same problem. And if you think I haven't satisfactorily explained what the problem is, be patient. Starting with Russell will get us on track, notwithstanding his notoriously stringent doctrine of acquaintance and his strict application of his famous distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Despite the fact that virtually no one buys into it, there are several features of his view that have had lasting influence on more popular ideas about singular thought.

2. Russell

Russellian propositions are structured, abstract entities capable of being true or false. They all contain properties or relations, and some contain particulars too. Russell had occasion to

call the ones that contain particulars “particular” propositions, but nowadays it is common to call them “singular,” as opposed to “general” propositions.

Every Russellian proposition is either true or false, but not every proposition is thinkable. In Russell’s view, understanding a proposition is not easy: “Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted” (1912: 58). Acquaintance is demanding: only things about which there is no doubt can be objects of acquaintance. That leaves out material objects. As Russell writes, “Among particulars, we have acquaintance with sense-data and (probably) with ourselves” (1912: 109).¹ Fortunately,

knowledge by description [...] enables us to pass beyond the limits of our experience. In spite of the fact that we can only know truths which are wholly composed of terms which we have experienced in acquaintance, we can yet have knowledge by description of things which we have never experienced. In view of the very narrow range of our immediate experience, this result is vital. (1912: 59)

Russell’s rationale for such a stringent requirement on acquaintance is both epistemological and logical. Epistemologically speaking, “It is scarcely conceivable that we can make a judgement or entertain a supposition without knowing what it is that we are judging or supposing about” (1912: 58).² Not only that, there cannot be more than one way of being acquainted with a given object, or else one could unwittingly believe contradictory things about it. Russell’s conception of acquaintance leaves no room for this sort of error. His logical rationale is to square what it takes to understand names for objects of acquaintance with the semantic role of logically proper names.³ Since their semantic role is

¹ Russell adds, “Among universals, there seems to be no principle by which we can decide which can be known by acquaintance, but it is clear that among those that can be so known are sensible qualities, relations of space and time, similarity, and certain abstract logical universals.”

² Here Russell does not mean ‘knowing what’ in the vernacular sense; he means something like being indubitably aware of.

³ Russell is sometimes thought to have an eccentric conception of logically proper names, but clearly he understands them on the familiar model of individual constants in logic. His desire to square the requirements of understanding them with their semantic role led him to deny that ordinary proper names are logically proper.

simply to introduce their bearers into propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur, understanding them must consist in acquaintance with their bearers.

Russell explains that there are plenty of propositions, indeed plenty of singular propositions, which we are not in a position to understand. We can't understand singular propositions about material objects other than those about ourselves (and only some at that).⁴ In a familiar discussion of Bismarck, Russell contrasts the situation of Bismarck himself, who "might have used his name directly to designate [himself] ... to ma[k]e a judgment about himself" containing him as a constituent (1912: 54), with *our* situation in respect to him:

when we make a statement about something known only by description, we often intend to make our statement, not in the form involving the description, but about the actual thing described. That is, when we say anything about Bismarck, we should like, if we could, to make the judgment which Bismarck alone can make, namely, the judgment of which he himself is a constituent. [But] in this we are necessarily defeated. ... What enables us to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that however we may vary the description (as long as the description is correct) the proposition described is still the same. This proposition, which is described and is known to be true, is what interests us; but we are not acquainted with the proposition itself, and do not know *it*, though we know it is true. (1912: 57)

The proposition that "interests us" is a singular proposition, but we cannot actually entertain it — we can know it only by description, that is, by entertaining a general, descriptonal proposition. This general proposition, if true, is made true by a fact involving Bismarck, but it does not itself involve Bismarck, and would be thinkable even if Bismarck never existed.

Although philosophers often accept some sort of distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, they generally reject the strict conception of acquaintance that Russell himself operated with, as well as the sense-data theory that went

⁴ Note that a proposition can be singular with respect to one argument slot and general with respect to another. So the distinction between singular and general propositions is not absolute, except for propositions whose only predicate is monadic.

with it. So why have I started with Russell? Because despite its implausibility, Russell's view ties in neatly with four ideas that are rather popular these days:

- Propositions, or at least structured propositions (often called *Russellian* propositions), divide into singular and general propositions.
- Proper names play the same semantic role (it corresponds to the epistemological role of acquaintance) as individual constants play in first-order logic.
- To have a *de re* attitude about an object is to be in some sort of direct, unmediated relation to that object.
- The content of a *de re* attitude is a singular proposition.

The last two ideas pertain to *de re* attitudes, and, as we will see in due course, certain assumptions about *de re* attitude reports have, under the double-edged influence of Russell, fostered ideas like these about *de re* attitudes themselves.

3. *De re* attitude reports

Somebody (I don't know who) came up with the bad idea of extending the *de re/de dicto* distinction from modalities to attitudes. Somebody (the same person, for all I know) then made matters worse by extending it to attitude reports.

Extending the *de re/de dicto* distinction from modalities to attitudes, or at least using those Latin labels for it, suggests that there is a good analogy between an object's necessarily having a certain property and its being the object of a belief.⁵ This extension give the false impression that *de re* attitudes involve some sort of direct, unmediated (or, as David Kaplan describes it, "natural, primitive, and pure") relation to that object, something like Russellian acquaintance. But surely the relation we have to material objects when we

⁵ Also, insofar as '*de dicto* belief' is supposed to mean that the belief content is a proposition, presumably '*de re* belief' is supposed to suggest otherwise. But this rules out the possibility that the contents of *de re* beliefs are propositions, perhaps singular propositions (not that I believe that — see Sec. 5).

have thoughts about them isn't like that. We can believe contradictory things about the same object, at one time and without logical incoherence. For example, we can believe of a certain individual that he is a great pianist and also believe of him that he is not.

Extending the *de re/de dicto* distinction to attitude reports makes for more trouble, especially if this is construed as a syntactic distinction. It is often supposed that *de dicto* belief reports canonically take the form, 'A believes that S', where the embedded clause is the dictum that is or expresses the thing believed, and that *de re* belief reports canonically take the form, 'A believes of o that it is F', where 'o' stands for a certain object. These contrasting forms suggested to Quine (1956) two different belief relations, a two-place relation between a subject and a sentence (Quine was not keen on propositions), and a three-place relation between subject, object, and open sentence.⁶ Friends of propositions and properties can rephrase this distinction accordingly.

There's a superficial problem with distinguishing *de re* from *de dicto* belief reports in this way, at least if it is supposed to correspond to the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* beliefs (or other attitude). The phrase '*de re* belief report' is structurally ambiguous, like 'French wine lover' and 'little bird watcher'. It can parse as either '*de re* [belief report]' or '[*de re* belief] report'. And don't suppose that this ambiguity marks a distinction without a difference. Just as a wine lover might be French but love only Italian wines or an Italian might love only French wines, so a syntactically *de re* report need not report a *de re* belief (I'd rather say 'singular' belief) and a syntactically *de dicto* report need not report a *de dicto* (or general) belief. A 'believes-that' report can report a singular belief and a 'believes-of' report can report a general belief. In short, the form of a belief report does not

⁶ Not being a fan of *de re* modalities, Quine avoided the *de re/de dicto* terminology in favor of 'relational' and 'notional'. He tried to derive a distinction between two belief relations based on a distinction between two forms of belief reports, the latter distinction being motivated by his resistance to quantifying in and by his sententialism about notional belief. Kaplan (1968) made a strong case that one belief relation is enough.

determine the type of belief being reported. For example, the infamous Zodiac killer of San Francisco might well have spoken truly when he said, “The police believe that I am diabolical.” This true belief report is *de re* even though it does not ascribe a *de re* belief to the police. It illustrates what Kaplan (1989a: 555 n.71) calls the “pseudo *de re*.”

It is not obvious that there is even a semantic distinction between reports that report *de re* and those that report *de dicto* beliefs. Of course, one could explicitly use the phrases ‘believes *de re*’ and ‘believes *de dicto*’ (like Quine’s ‘relationally believes’ and ‘notionally believes’) to mark the difference, but this in itself would not shed any light on what the difference amounts to. Alternatively, we might suppose that a belief report of the form ‘A believes that o is F’ is semantically ambiguous as between a *de re* and a *de dicto* reading. Which reading is operative would depend on whether the sentence permits substitution of a co-referring term for ‘o’ (without affecting truth value) and whether it permits exportation and quantifying in (here one might distinguish between *substitutional* and *referential* opacity). That is, if ‘A believes that o is F’ is true, then the reading is *de re* only if ‘A believes that o* is F’ is true, where $o^* = o$, and only if ‘ $(\exists x)(A \text{ believes that } x \text{ is } F)$ ’ is true.⁷

Now this might distinguish the two alleged readings, but it is not clear what the evidence is for two. We could just as well say that substitution and exportation are permissible except when they are not, and that when they are not, that is not because of a distinct, opaque reading but merely a non-referential use on the part of the speaker.

Also, there can be reports of genuinely *de re* beliefs even when there is no object for the belief to be about. For example, we could truly say that Macbeth believes that dagger he’s hallucinating is sharp even though there’s no such dagger. The belief is *de re* even though there is no dagger (or anything else) for it to be about. As will be explained later (in

⁷ Here ‘o’ and ‘o*’ are assumed to be referential singular terms, since, strictly speaking, substitution of co-referring terms and exportation/quantifying do not apply to occurrences of descriptions and other quantificational phrases.

Sec. 7), a belief can be *de re* in character even if it is not in fact about anything (of course, it has no hope of being true). The idea that there must be something that a *de re* belief is about reflects the misconception, embodied in Russell's stringent notion of acquaintance, that *de re* belief involves some sort of pure, unmediated relation between subject and object which somehow guarantees the existence of the object. This misconception is abetted by the idea that *de re* beliefs are beliefs whose canonical ascription permits substitution or at least exportation.

Finally, consider ascriptions of the form 'A believes that something is F'. It might seem that these are two-ways ambiguous, in which case the ascribed belief could be either that something or other is F or that a certain particular thing is F. The latter reading is given by paraphrases like 'A believes of a certain thing that it is F' and 'There is a certain thing such that A believes that it is F'. However, these paraphrases exclude the case of a belief "about" a non-existent object, such as Macbeth's belief, which is *de re* in character.

4. Reductionism and eliminativism about *de re* thought

In the 1970s it was often argued that there is no such thing as *de re* or singular thought about material objects (other than oneself, that is), or else that it comes to a kind of descriptive thought.⁸ Now in metaphysics it is important to distinguish between reductionism and eliminativism about putative entities of a given category. There is a big difference between claiming that entities of one sort are constituted by and amount to nothing more than entities (or complexes of entities) of another sort and denying that there any such entities at all. However, in the case of *de re* or singular thought, the difference doesn't amount to much. Those who claim that *de re* thoughts are a species of descriptive thought are, so far as I can tell, in effect denying that the thoughts in question are really *de*

⁸ See Sosa 1970, Schiffer 1978, and Searle 1979: 157-161 (see also Searle 1983: 208-217).

re. What they're claiming is that putative *de re* thoughts, at least about material objects other than oneself, are actually descriptive thoughts.

Consider, for example, Stephen Schiffer's (1978) "description theory of *de re* belief," on which thoughts about objects are *de re* only with respect to oneself and the present moment.⁹ In his view Russell was basically right: knowledge of things other than oneself can be only by description. So, although Schiffer characterized his theory as reductionist, it was essentially eliminativist, since to have a thought about an object under a description of a certain sort, albeit one containing indexicals, is to have a *de re* thought not about that object but only about the referents of the indexicals.

Searle took a clearly eliminativist position. He contended that the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* belief is an outright illusion, arising from "a confusion between features of reports of beliefs and features of the beliefs being reported" (1979: 157). Diehard descriptivist that he is, he didn't seriously consider that there might be an independent distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* belief.

In the 1970s the term 'latitudinarianism' was used for two distinct but conflated claims, one about belief and one about belief reports. One was the claim that if you have a descriptive belief that the F is G and there is a unique F (and perhaps also that you know that there is a unique F), then you have a *de re* belief about the F that it is G, even though your knowledge of the F is, at least as Russell would say, only by description. The other claim focuses on belief reports rather than belief itself. It endorses very liberal exportation. That is, 'A believes that the F is G' entails 'A believes of the F that it is G', provided there

⁹ Searle (1983: ch. 2) defends a more elaborate but less plausible description theory, on which a perceptual experience (and, derivatively, a perceptual belief) represents its object as a cause of itself. So an experience is self-referential and represents its object descriptively. I have argued against this view (Bach 1987/1994: 19 n.12), and fuller arguments have been given by Tyler Burge (1991) and John McDowell (1991). Searle's (1991) reply to them is subtle, but he does not seem to appreciate this basic worry: the object need not be represented descriptively because its identity is not determined satisfactorily.

is a unique F (and perhaps also that A knows that there is a unique F).¹⁰ These two latitudinarian views are distinct but closely related. The first implies, assuming there is a unique shortest spy and you know this, that if you descriptively believe that the shortest spy is a spy, you have a *de re* belief about the shortest spy that he or she is a spy. The second view implies (on the same assumptions) that you believe of the shortest spy that he or she is a spy.¹¹ This view implies that the belief is *de re* given the added (but mistaken) assumption that ‘believes-of’ reports report only *de re* beliefs. However, most latitudinarians appear to have made this assumption, at least implicitly. So even though latitudinarianism used to be pitched as a reductionist view, I take it to be eliminativist. I also take it to be wrong, precisely because it *is* eliminativist.

The original eliminativist about singular thought was Frege (1892), with his distinction between sense and reference (as ‘Sinn’ and ‘Bedeutung’ are generally translated). Unlike the propositions of Russell, Fregean thoughts are composed not of objects and properties/relations but of senses of them. A thought expressible by a sentence containing a singular term or proper name (“Eigennamen,” which covers definite descriptions as well as proper names proper) includes the sense of that term. The sense associates with that term a

¹⁰ This is not the strict sort of exportation alluded to in note 7.

¹¹ Some direct referentialists, for example Kaplan (1989a: esp. 536, 554 n.69, 560 n.76), have endorsed this second view with respect to any direct referring term (including a definite description operated on by ‘dthat’), as opposed to a definite description, that occurs in the that-clause of a belief report. Kaplan later retracted the implication that ‘believes-of’ reports are reports of *de re* beliefs (1989b: 604-7, esp. n.94). He argued that one can refer to something even if one is not in a position to have *de re* thoughts about it. I have contested this view in Bach 2004: 204-12, and 2006: 529-31.

Resisting Kaplan’s contention that using a directly referential term puts one in a position not only to refer to an object but also to have *de re* thoughts about it, Salmon argues that using a directly referential term, although it does put one in a position to refer to the object, does not enable one to have, indeed does not require having, *de re* thoughts about it (2004: 246-8). He forthrightly acknowledges, given his view that the contents of *de re* thoughts are singular propositions, the implication that one can express propositions that one does not understand. This is not the place to examine Salmon’s provocative view (in Sec. 5 I did question the claim that the contents of *de re* thoughts are singular propositions), which depends on certain direct referentialist theses that I do not accept, for reasons explained in Bach 2006.

way of thinking (a “mode of presentation”) of an object. To think of an object is to grasp a sense, which in turn determines the object. It lays down a condition that something must satisfy to be the object thought of by grasping that sense. So there is no real relation between object and thought, just the semantic relation of satisfaction, and the condition to be satisfied does not depend on the object that satisfies it.¹² Accordingly, a term for an individual thing contributes its sense to that of a sentence in which it occurs regardless of which individual is in fact its referent, if indeed it has one. As Frege says, “the thought remains the same whether ‘Odysseus’ has reference or not.” The same object can be presented in different ways, under different modes of presentation, but it is not essential to any mode of presentation that it actually present anything at all.

There is one other reductionist/eliminativist view of *de re* thought worth mentioning. On this view, to think of an object, or to be in a position to think of it, is to know of it. This view has been presented in various forms (they are briefly discussed in Bach 1987/1994: 15-16), but the basic idea is that knowledge by description will do, at least if the description is of the right sort (it has to impose some sort of special epistemic condition). Russell’s characterization of knowledge by description makes clear why a view of this sort is eliminativist:

We shall say that an object is ‘known by description’ when we know that it is ‘the so-and-so’, i.e. when we know that there is one object, and no more, having a certain property; and it will generally be implied that we do not have knowledge of the same object by acquaintance. [...] We shall say that we have ‘merely descriptive knowledge’ of the so-and-so when, although we know that the so-and-so exists, yet we do not know any proposition ‘*a* is the so-and-so’, where *a* is something with which we are acquainted. (1912: 53).

¹² Gareth Evans (1982) and John McDowell (1984) developed a notion of object-dependent senses. Thoughts containing *de re* senses, as McDowell called them, are the neo-Fregean counterparts of Russellian singular propositions, are themselves object-dependent. However, these notions of *de re* senses and object-dependent thoughts have been forcefully challenged by Simon Blackburn (1984: ch. 9), Peter Carruthers (1987), Gabriel Segal (1989), and Harold Noonan (1991), and the suggestion they are Fregean in character has been debunked by David Bell (1990).

In other words, we can grasp only general propositions with respect to the object in question. But this shows that any account on which *de re* belief is analyzed in terms of knowledge by description is really eliminativist about *de re* belief.¹³ Such accounts conflate uniqueness with particularity. Descriptive thoughts are about satisfiers of the relevant descriptions only in the way that counterfeit money is money and a rubber duck is a duck.¹⁴

5. What about the “what” and the “how”?

The discussion so far might suggest that to have a singular thought about something involves entertaining a singular proposition about it. That was certainly Russell’s view, but let’s not forget that this view led Russell to deny that we can have singular thoughts about material things other than ourselves. This seems to be the view of contemporary direct-reference theorists as well, except they are much more liberal regarding what we can have singular thoughts about.

In discussing beliefs and their ascription, most direct-reference theorists rely on a distinction between Russellian propositions and ways of taking them (modes of presentation of them). This distinction, between the “what” and the “how” of belief, is a curious blend of Russellian and Fregean ideas. The contents of beliefs are Russellian propositions, and ways of taking them are essentially Fregean thoughts. This distinction is introduced primarily to deal with puzzles about belief reports, such as substitution puzzles, but it is thought also to tell us something about belief itself. For example, it purports to

¹³ We should not be misled by Russell’s observation, quoted earlier, that “when we make a statement about something known only by description, we often intend to make our statement, not in the form involving the description, but about the actual thing described” (1912: 56). Obviously he does not mean that we actually have an intention with this as its content, since we are not in a position to grasp any singular proposition about that thing.

¹⁴ As on Russell’s theory of descriptions, the relation of denotation (not reference) between a definite description and the (unique) object (if any) that satisfies it is a semantically inert relation. As Russell would say, denoting phrases, such as definite descriptions, do not contribute what they denote to propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur. Denotation is not an indirect kind of reference.

explain how a rational person can believe that a certain object has a certain property and also disbelieve that this object has a certain property — the person thinks of that thing under distinct modes of presentation (and does not take them to be modes of presentation of the same thing). So far as I know, the modern version of this distinction and its application to belief reports originated with Schiffer (1977). He argued that what I am calling the “what” and the “how” of belief both enter into the contents of belief reports, the what explicitly, the how implicitly. In the case of ascriptions of a *de re* belief, the that-clause expresses a singular proposition, but there is also implicit indexical reference to the mode(s) of presentation of the relevant object(s). Much recent debate has concerned whether information about modes of presentation enters into the semantic contents of belief reports, as on Schiffer’s “hidden-indexical” theory (and various more recent versions of it), or is merely pragmatically imparted, as on the view first put forward by Nathan Salmon (1986).

In this dispute it is assumed that belief reporters, in using sentences of the form ‘A believes that S’, assert propositions that express three-term relations between believers, propositions, and ways of taking propositions (in fact, Schiffer (1992) has long since repudiated this assumption and with it the hidden-indexical theory itself). Concomitant with this assumption is the claim that the proposition expressed by the that-clause of a standard singular belief report of the form ‘A believes that o is F’ is the content of the ascribed belief. This is the singular proposition that o is F, and the relevant way of taking that proposition is not part of that content.¹⁵

¹⁵ Interestingly, Schiffer originally argued, on Fregean grounds, not only that “to have a belief about a thing is to have a belief about it under a mode of presentation” (1977: 32) but also that a singular proposition cannot comprise the complete content of a belief (except about oneself or the present moment). He went on to suggest that the complete content of a singular belief is a “quasi-singular,” mode-of-presentation-containing proposition (1978: 182). Quasi-singular propositions play a prominent role in François Recanati’s (1993: Sec. II.3) account of belief reports.

So the participants in this dispute assume that the that-clauses of a belief reports specify only the what of belief, not the how, and, more fundamentally, that there is a genuine distinction to be drawn between the how and the what. Next I will suggest that this distinction is a convenient philosophical fabrication, whose plausibility depends on a certain dubious presupposition.

6. What that-clauses don't do

It is commonly taken for granted that a belief report of the form 'A believes that p' is true only if the proposition that p is among the things that A believes. I call this the *Specification Assumption*. Belief reports of this form certainly *appear* to relate believers to things believed. Indeed, it is often suggested that the clause 'that p' is a kind of singular term, whose reference is the proposition that p (the idea is that 'that' is a term-forming operator on sentences). If that's right, we have a straightforward explanation of the apparent validity of such inferences as the following:

Inference 1

Jeremy believes everything Hilary says.	$(\forall x)(Shx \supset B_jx)$
Hilary says that grass is green.	Shp
So, Jeremy believes that grass is green.	B_jp

If the clause 'that grass is green' is a term, then Inference 1 has the form indicated on the right, in which case it is not only valid but formally valid. The analogous point seems to apply to Inference 2:

Inference 2

Art believes that Paderewski had musical talent.	Bap
Bart believes that Paderewski had musical talent.	Bbp
So, there is something both Art and Bart believe.	$(\exists x)(Bax \ \& \ Bbx)$

But is it so clear that the that-clause of a true belief report has to specify something the believer believes? Consider the following version of Saul Kripke's (1979) Paderewski

case.¹⁶ Because of what Peter believes regarding a certain pianist, an utterance of (1) is true.

(1) Peter believes that Paderewski had musical talent.

Even so, an utterance of (2)

(2) Peter disbelieves that Paderewski had musical talent.

could be true too, because of what Peter believes regarding a certain statesman. It happens that these are the same man, Paderewski, but Peter does not realize this.

Kripke's puzzle is to explain how (1) and (2) can both be true (not that both would be uttered in the same context without qualification). They seem to have Peter believing and disbelieving the same thing. That's what they must do if the following inference is formally valid, with the form indicated:

Inference 3

Peter believes that Paderewski had musical talent.	Bap
Peter disbelieves that Paderewski had musical talent.	Dap
So, there is something Peter both believes and disbelieves.	($\exists x$)(Bax & Dax)

Kripke's puzzle arises from the fact that Peter's problem is ignorance, not bad logic. But that doesn't seem right if (1) and (2) really do have him believing and disbelieving the same thing. Of course we could invoke the distinction between the "what" and the "how" and suppose that Peter does both believe and disbelieve the same thing but takes it in two different ways. But there is an alternative, one that is intuitively much more plausible.

We can reject the Specification Assumption and say that (1) and (2) are true but not because Peter believes and disbelieves the same thing. This is possible if the that-clause they both contain does not specify anything he believes or anything he disbelieves — it merely characterizes something he believes and characterizes something he disbelieves, and these needn't be the same thing. If Peter likes a certain pianist and Peter dislikes a certain pianist, it does not follow that Peter likes and dislikes the same pianist. Somewhat

¹⁶ The following argument is drawn from Bach 1997 and Bach 2000.

similarly, I suggest, (1) and (2) do not jointly imply that Peter believes and disbelieves the same thing — Inference 3 does not have the form indicated and is not formally valid. One and the same that-clause, even though it expresses but one proposition, can characterize (as opposed to specify) two distinct belief contents.¹⁷

All this entails that a belief report can be true even if the believer does not believe the specific proposition expressed by the that-clause. In particular, the (complete) content of a singular belief is not a singular proposition, although the truth of the thing believed requires the truth of such a proposition. In general, belief reports abstract from belief contents. The content of the sentence is an abstraction from the content of the belief, in effect an equivalence class of different belief (or thought) contents, each one of which requires the truth of that singular proposition. Perhaps the content of the belief being conveyed is a quasi-singular proposition or perhaps it is something of some other sort. Whatever the correct story, we cannot expect to learn much about the nature of belief contents just by looking into the semantics and the pragmatics of belief reports.

At the end of “A Puzzle about Belief,” Kripke speaks of “the cloud our paradox places over the notion of ‘content’ in this area” (1979: 270) and suggests that examples like the Paderewski case and the others he discusses reveal the danger of relying on “alleged failures of substitutivity in belief contexts to draw any significant conclusions about proper names. Hard cases make bad law.” The problem is, as I see it, is that every case is a

¹⁷ Schiffer (2003) goes down a different path here. Whereas I deny that the proposition that Paderewski had musical talent, as expressed by the that-clauses of (1) and (2), is what Peter is being said both to believe and disbelieve, Schiffer would deny that those two identical that-clauses express the same proposition. In his view, that-clauses can express, indeed refer to, different propositions in different contexts. The one in (1) does refer to what Peter is being said to believe and the one in (2) to what he is being said to disbelieve, but these are not the same proposition. Schiffer’s path leads to rejecting compositionality and to adopting a new conception of propositions, as unstructured and “pleonastic.” Instead of retaining the assumption, which I am not prepared to give up, that the contents of that-clauses are fully determined by the contents of their constituents (and their syntax), in his view (at least as I understand it) their contents are partly determined by the truth conditions of attitude ascriptions in which they occur.

Paderewski case, at least potentially, and that all cases are hard cases. You can't determine from the content of the that-clause of a belief ascription what belief a speaker speaking literally would ascribe. Kripke's examples also lead him to lament, "When we enter into [this] area, we enter into an area where our normal practices of interpretation and attribution of belief are subjected to the greatest possible strain, perhaps to the point of breakdown" (1979: 268-9). I say there's no such strain, once we see through the illusion that (1) and (2) have Peter believing and disbelieving the same thing. The real strain is in trying to figure out the nature of the things we believe, but at least we know where not to look.

7. De re representations and relations

Russellian acquaintance is an unmediated cognitive relation. It suggests the idea of pure *de re* thought, even though, of course, for Russell one cannot bear this relation to material objects other than oneself. Aside from its inspiration from Russell, whatever appeal there is to the idea of pure *de re* thought depends on a false dichotomy: the only alternative to thinking of an object under a description (i.e. individual concept), which does not really count as thinking of it in a *de re* way, is to think of it directly, in an unmediated way. But this dichotomy misrepresents the relevant contrast. The contrast is not between mediated and unmediated thinking.

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. So the relevant contrast is between thinking of something in a *de re* way and thinking "of" something under a description. This leaves open the possibility that in some cases one's connection to an object of *de re* thought is remote. It also allows for the possibility that one can unwittingly think of the same object at the same time and coherently believe conflicting things about it.

Among those who reject the reductionist or eliminativist views discussed in Sec. 4, it is common to suppose that we can have singular thoughts about objects we are perceiving, are informed of, or have perceived or have been informed of and now remember.¹⁸ In my view (Bach 1987/1994: ch. 1), we do so by means of non-descriptive, *de re* modes of presentation, which connect us, whether immediately or remotely, to an object. The connection is causal-historical, and involves a chain of representations originating with a perception of the object. Which object one is thinking of is determined relationally, not satisfactorily. The thought does not have to represent its being in that relation to the object but merely has to be in that relation. That is, the object one's thought is about depends not on satisfying a certain description but on being representationally connected to that very thought (token). So singular thoughts are token-reflexive and essentially indexical (to borrow John Perry's (1979) phrase). *De re* representations are mental indexicals.

On this conception of singular thought, there must be a representational connection, however remote and many-linked, between thought and object. A *de re* representation of a material object must be a percept or derive from a percept, either one's own or someone else's. If it derives from a percept of one's own, it is a memory image. If it derives from someone else's, it's the product of a perhaps many-linked chain of communication. But you can have *de re* thoughts about objects you've merely heard of or read of, provided that you're at the end of a chain of communication and representation, originating in perception, back to the object. In short, to be in a position to have thoughts about an object, you must be representationally connected to the object, however indirectly and remotely.

¹⁸ As Kaplan puts it, "So how shall I apprehend thee? Let me count the ways. I may apprehend you by (more or less) direct perception. I may apprehend you by memory of (more or less) direct perception. And finally, I may apprehend you through a sign that has been created to signify you" (1989b: 604). The best-known and most fully developed version of this view is due to Evans. In defending my own version of this view, I questioned (Bach 1987/1994: 41-45) Evans' reliance on what he calls Russell's Principle, that "in order to have a thought about a particular object, you must know which object it is about which you are thinking" (1982: 74).

This conception of singular thought does not preclude the possibility of being in a certain *de re* representational state without there being an object represented. Which object is represented is a matter of which object, as an object of perception, is or was at the other end of the representational chain. If there is no such object, the singular thought has no object, and has no hope of being true. In that case, it lacks a complete truth condition. So a singular thought can fail to be about an object, just as a descriptive thought can fail to be “about” an object, but for a very different reason. The reason is not that no object (uniquely) satisfies the relevant description but that nothing is in the relevant relation to the thought (token).¹⁹

The functional role of a *de re* belief state cannot by itself determine what it is about. The object of the belief depends on which object is actually the one with which the belief is representationally connected. Nor can phenomenological properties determine what a *de re* belief state is about. Accordingly, we can be in a state that has all the subjective earmarks of being about something but in fact is not. Some beliefs and thoughts are *de re* in character without being *de re* in content, that is, when there is nothing they are about.

As I have stressed, we cannot form a singular thought about an individual we can “think of” only under a description. For example, we cannot think of the first child born in the 22nd century because we are not representationally connected to that individual. And giving it a name doesn’t help. Our thought “about” that child is general in content, not singular. Nor can we think of the first child born in the fourth century BC. However, we can think of Aristotle, because we are connected to him through a long chain of communication. We can think of him even though we could not have recognized him, just as I can think of the bird that just caught my eye as it flew by my window. Being able to

¹⁹ Of course, a definite description can be generated that gives the condition (being uniquely related) that something must meet to be the object of a *de re* thought (token), but the thought does not *represent* that condition.

think of an individual does not require being able to identify that individual by means of a uniquely characterizing description.

Such an ability may be necessary for re-identifying something, for thinking of it as the same thing one has had certain other thoughts about, but that is another matter. To deal with this, many theorists, myself included (Bach 1987/1994: ch. 2), have used the model of file folders. But this model helps only to illuminate how we can add new beliefs to what we already believe about a particular individual. 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.²⁰

8. Extending acquaintance

If acquaintance (familiarity) with an individual is not necessary for thinking of it, how far can the relation of acquaintance be extended so that being in that extended relation to something still puts one in a position to think of that thing? Whatever it is, let's call this extension of the acquaintance relation the *representational connection* relation. My hunch has long been that to be in a position to think of, to be able to have singular thoughts about, an individual, requires having a representation of that individual but that there is no constraint on how remote the representational connection can be. Perceiving an individual is the most immediate way of being in that position, but, as I've suggested, having perceived and now having a memory image of that individual will do, or even hearing about or reading about that individual from someone else who has perceived that individual

²⁰ This point applies to the use of files in linguistic semantics in the study of indefinite descriptions. A discourse "referent" is said to be introduced by a sentence of the form 'An F is G' and then subsequent "references" to the F so introduced are made by pronouns and definite descriptions anaphoric on that indefinite description. These discussions do not discriminate between genuine reference and descriptive "reference." On the other hand, for a probing philosophical study that uses the file-folder model to elucidate building up a body of beliefs about an individual, see Lawlor 2001, appropriately entitled *New Thoughts about Old Things*.

or who at least has heard or read about that individual from someone who has heard or read about that individual ... from someone who has perceived that individual.

Is the representational connection relation even more inclusive than this?

Unfortunately, I've never been able to find a principled answer to this question. Or, if I have, I haven't been able to satisfy myself that it is a principled answer. That's why I'm stuck on questions like these. So, for example, does seeing a photograph or film of someone put one in a representational connection with them? Hearing someone's voice? Does reading someone's name do the trick, even outside the context of communication? For example, can you have singular thoughts about someone whose name you read on a luggage tag, in a phone book, or on a tombstone? I'm inclined to think not. In these situations we seem to be only in the position that Russell thought we are in with respect to Bismarck.²¹ On the other hand (as with economists there are no one-handed philosophers), perhaps that's the position we're in with respect to anything we haven't encountered ourselves, in which case the extent of singular thought is much more limited than I have been supposing.

In lieu of offering a general account of what it takes to get a thing in a thought and of what the limits on this are, I'd like to return to the problem of particularity. Addressing this problem will at least suggest that there is nothing inherently problematic about thinking of a thing, which, after all, we do all the time.

9. Character, content, and the problem of particularity

Can the content of an experience be the same regardless of which object, if any, it is an experience of? Obviously not if the content is, or has, a truth condition and the truth

²¹ These questions all pertain to singular thoughts about physical things. But we could ask similar questions about things of other sorts as well. Can we have singular thoughts about times and places, since we aren't exactly causally connected to them? For example, can we have singular thoughts about tomorrow? Can we have singular thoughts about properties, kinds, relations, numbers, sets, and other abstract objects?

condition involves the object (that *this* object has the properties it appears to have). Then, if the experience had a different object, the truth condition would be different: *that* object would have to have the relevant properties.²² And if the experience had no object, its content would not be (or have) a truth condition.

On the other hand, intuitively (at least on Descartes's intuition and mine) the experience could have been just as it is, representing the world in just the same way, at least qualitatively, regardless of which object, if any, it has. Now, if how the experience represents the world is its content, then its content is independent of its object. But if this were right, its content would not be singular. It would be either general or schematic. If general, its truth condition would be that there exists an object which is uniquely related to the perceiver at the time and which has the relevant properties. But the content of an experience does not seem to be general.²³ What about the suggestion that the content of an experience of an object is schematic, at least partly characterizable by an open sentence of the form 'x is F', where 'F' expresses the relevant properties? This is on the right track, but it is better to regard what is thus characterized not as the *content* but as the *character* of the experience.²⁴ Although the content is object-dependent, the character is object-independent.

The way, then, to solve the problem of particularity is to invoke the distinction between the character and the content of an experience. It's on account of its character, together with its context, that an experience satisfies a condition analogous to Tyler Burge's description of a *de re* belief as one "whose correct ascription places the believer in an appropriate nonconceptual relation to objects the belief is about" (1977: 346). Your

²² I'm assuming that the same experience could have had a different object, although it might be argued that events have their causes essentially.

²³ At least not in the first instance. You might, like a frog, be checking for the presence of something of a certain kind, say a fly, and be indifferent as to which one it is that you detect.

²⁴ It's interesting that in certain debates in the philosophy of mind the terms 'character' and 'content' seem to be used interchangeably, as in 'phenomenological character' and 'phenomenological content'.

experience is of an object not by representing its relation to the object but by being in that relation. The character of an experience is incomplete, in the sense that it does not determine a truth condition independently of its representational relation to an object (if any). Experiences are inherently perspectival and essentially indexical. So, it seems to me, are perceptual, memory, and self-ascriptive beliefs. Singular thoughts in general are essentially indexical.

How do singular thoughts tie in with general, perspective-free thoughts? Good question. As Simon Blackburn laments, “Adjusting the relation between essentially perspectival thoughts, and thoughts conceived of in an objective, context-independent way (*timeless* truths and falsities), is one of the hardest problems in metaphysics” (1984: 343).

10. Summing up

Puzzling as it may be how things can get into thoughts (and experiences), if we didn’t have singular thoughts about things our view of the world would be merely qualitative. So they must get in there somehow. But it had better not have to be by Russellian acquaintance, for that is an unmediated cognitive relation (“natural, primitive, and pure,” as Kaplan aptly described it), which we cannot bear to things external to ourselves. Some philosophers, recognizing that thoughts about things must be mediated, see no alternative to Russellian acquaintance that leaves the possibility of genuine singular thought intact. They suppose that we can think of things only under descriptions, only by entertaining general propositions, or via something like Fregean senses, which though object-determining are object-independent. On such views, uniqueness serves as a surrogate for particularity – things do not really get into our thoughts; we can think that there exists an object of a certain sort but not actually think of any particular object.

Proponents of such views tend to think that the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* (descriptive) belief collapses into the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* belief reports. I

argued that this is a distinct distinction, which, insofar as it holds up semantically, sheds little light on the other distinction and trivializes the very idea of singular thought. A distinct source of trouble is the widely accepted Specification Assumption, according to which the that-clause of a true belief report must fully specify something that the subject believes. I suggested that that-clause need merely characterize the belief and that, in general, the semantic contents of that-clauses (even relative to contexts) are more coarse-grained than contents of thoughts.²⁵

I have argued that the difference between descriptive and singular thought consists not in the difference between mediated and unmediated thought but between descriptive and *de re* representations. There are different sorts of *de re* representational relations, based on perception, memory, or communication, but however remote and many-linked they are, they must be grounded in someone's perception of the represented object. *De re* representations function as mental indexicals. Thoughts containing them need not have objects to be *de re* in character, but they must have objects to be *de re* in content. Having a singular thought about something does not require knowing who or what it is but, rather, being representationally connected to it. Unlike the "objects" of descriptive thoughts, the objects of singular thoughts are determined not satisfactorily but relationally.

²⁵ Speaking of language, I should note that our discussion of what it takes to think of something did not take up the question of what it takes to refer to something. This question divides into two: which singular terms (directly) refer, rather than merely denote, and what does it take for a speaker to refer to something? (Generally I avoid using the phrase 'directly referential', for in my book, given that some singular terms, namely definite descriptions, do not refer but merely denote (in Russell's sense), the occurrence of 'directly' in 'directly referential' is redundant, and 'indirectly referential' is an oxymoron.) I have not addressed these questions here, having taken them up previously (Bach 2006), where I also discuss how singular reference ties in with singular thought. One obvious question in that regard is whether being able to refer to something requires being in a position to have singular thoughts about it. I argue that it is necessary.

References

- Bach, Kent (1987/1994), *Thought and Reference*, pbk. ed., revised with postscript, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____ (1997), "Do Belief Reports Report Beliefs?", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78: 215-41.
- _____ (2000), "A Puzzle about Belief Reports," in K. Jaszczolt (ed.), *The Pragmatics of Propositional Attitude Reports*, Oxford: Elsevier.
- _____ (2004), "Descriptions: Points of Reference," in M. Reimer and A. Bezuidenhout (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____ (2006), "What does it Take to Refer?", in E. Lepore and B.C. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bell, David (1990), "How 'Russellian' was Frege?", *Mind* 99: 267-277.
- Blackburn, Simon (1984), *Spreading the Word*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Burge, Tyler (1977), "De Re Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 74: 338-62.
- _____ (1991), "Vision and Intentional Content," in LePore and Van Gulick.
- Carruthers, Peter (1987), "Russellian Thoughts," *Mind* 96: 18-35.
- Evans, Gareth (1982), *The Varieties of Reference*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Frege, Gottlob (1892/1990). "On Sense and Reference." Reprinted in P. Geach and M. Black (eds.), *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kaplan, David (1968), "Quantifying In," *Synthese* 19: 178-214.
- _____ (1989a), "Demonstratives," in J. Perry, J. Almog, and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____ (1989b), "Afterthoughts," in J. Perry, J. Almog, and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kripke, Saul (1980), *Naming and Necessity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- _____ (1979), "A Puzzle about Belief," in *Meaning and Use*, A. Margalit (ed.), Dordrecht: Reidel.
- Lawlor, Krista (2001), *New Thoughts about Old Things: Cognitive Policies as the Ground of Singular Concepts*, New York: Garland Publishing.
- LePore, Ernest and Robert Van Gulick, eds., (1991), *John Searle and his Critics*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- McDowell, John (1984), "De Re Senses," in C. Wright (ed.), *Frege: Tradition and Influence*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- _____ (1991), "Intentionality de re," in LePore and Van Gulick.

- Noonan, Harold (1991), "Object-dependent thoughts and psychological redundancy," *Analysis* 51: 1-9.
- Quine, W. V. (1956), "Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes," *Journal of Philosophy* 53: 177-87.
- Perry, John (1979), "The Problem of the Essential Indexical," *Noûs* 13: 3-21.
- Recanati, François (1993), *Direct Reference: From Language to Thought*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Russell, Bertrand (1912), reset 1946, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Salmon, Nathan (1986), *Frege's Puzzle*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- _____ (2004), "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," in M. Reimer and A. Bezuidenhout (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schiffer, Stephen (1977), "Naming and Knowing," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2: 28-41.
- _____ (1978), "The Basis of Reference," *Erkenntnis* 13: 171-206.
- _____ (1992), "Belief Ascription," *Journal of Philosophy* 89: 490-521.
- _____ (2003), *The Things We Mean*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Searle, John (1979), "Referential and Attributive," in *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- _____ (1983), *Intentionality. An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press.
- _____ (1991), "Response: Reference and Intentionality," in LePore and Van Gulick.
- Segal, Gabriel (1989), "The Return of the Individual," *Mind* 98: 39-57.
- Sosa, Ernest (1970), "Propositional Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De re*," *Journal of Philosophy* 67: 883-896.
- Valberg, J. J. (1992), *The Puzzle of Experience*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.