Singular Thoughts, Names, and Files

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draft

There is an important cognitive difference between a thought that is directed towards a particular object and a thought that is not so directed but is instead about a certain kind of objects. For example, there is a difference between my thoughts about my brother and my thoughts about brothers more generally. The former is an example of a singular thought while the latter exemplifies general thoughts. Similarly, when I come upon a particularly grizzly murder then there is an important cognitive difference between my thought that Smith’s murderer is insane when I know who the murderer is and when I do not have such knowledge. In the former case my thought is about a particular person while in the latter case it is not about a particular person but rather about the murderer whoever it might be. Again, the former exemplifies singular thoughts and the latter general thoughts.

While there is a general agreement about there being singular thoughts and general thoughts there is little agreement on what exactly constitutes a singular thought. Similarly, there is not much agreement on the conditions for one acquiring singular thoughts. In particular, the disagreement about the latter focuses on the one hand on the epistemic requirement of acquaintance and on the other hand on the metaphysical requirement of existence. Even those who insists on an acquaintance requirement for singular thoughts do not agree on the strength of the acquaintance relation.

Most direct reference theorists adhere to what I will call the orthodox view when it comes to acquaintance, namely the view that one can be sufficiently acquainted with an object and so obtain a singular thought about it in virtue of being at the receiving end of a use of a name of the object that
stretches back to an initial baptism of it. I will argue that we have good reasons to doubt the truth of the orthodox view. But even if the orthodox view is not right, one nevertheless has to acknowledge that names do play a large role when we exchange information and I will provide an account of mental files that accounts for such a role. My take on mental files will be significantly different from, and will carry fewer commitments than the influential accounts of Robin Jeshion and Francois Recanati.

Russell and Singular Thoughts

The discussion of singular thought can be traced back to Bertrand Russell. While the discussion during recent decades has been driven primarily by semantic concerns having mostly to do with direct reference, Russell’s reasons for introducing singular thoughts focused more on epistemology and philosophy of mind, i.e., representation. In *Points About Denoting*, dating from 1903, Russell writes:

…if I ask: Is Smith married? And the answer is affirmative, I then know that “Smith’s wife” is a denoting phrase, although I don’t know who Smith’s wife is. We may distinguish the terms [objects, individuals] with which we are acquainted from others which are merely denoted. E.g. in the above case, I am supposed to be acquainted with the term [object, individual] Smith and the relation marriage, and thence to be able to conceive a term [object, individual] having this relation to Smith, although I am not acquainted with any such term [object, individual].

…we know that every human being now living has one and only one father…This shows that to be known by description is not the same thing as to be known by acquaintance, for “the father of x” is an adequate description in the same that, as a matter of fact, there is only one person to whom it is applicable.¹
So, one has direct knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance of those objects that one is acquainted with. One can have knowledge by description of those objects with which one is not acquainted. The latter enables us to think about objects with which we are not acquainted.

It is interesting that at this time, when Russell first introduced his distinction, he uses a knowledge of an individual, namely Smith, as a paradigm example of knowledge by acquaintance. Clearly he thought that one could be acquainted with individuals, and presumably other ordinary objects, via perception. On the other hand, we can extend our knowledge beyond that with which we are acquainted via knowledge by descriptions. Descriptions are denoting phrases that express denoting complexes that are constituents of propositions expressed by sentences containing denoting phrases. Since a denoting complex denotes the object that uniquely satisfies it, we can knowledge of and talk about, for example, Smith’s wife, Triphena.

On Russell’s view some propositions contain objects. For example, the proposition expressed by Smith is married contains Smith. If I am to be able to believe the proposition expressed by Smith is married then, somehow, I need to turn Smith into a cognitive object. Acquaintance allows for that to happen. If I am acquainted with Smith, he is a constituent of the proposition expressed when I think or say Smith is married. But since I am not acquainted with Triphena, she is not a constituent of the proposition expressed when I think or say Triphena is married. Instead, the proposition contains a denoting complex.

The introduction of sense data changes the picture outlined above, but one can view the change as resulting from tightening up the acquaintance requirement while leaving the other aspects of the picture as they were. In 1912 Russell writes:

We shall say that we have acquaintance with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths. Thus in the
At this point Russell would not say that I am acquainted with Smith. Instead, I am acquainted with my sense-data that make up the appearance of Smith. My knowledge of Smith is knowledge by description. He is the physical object that causes such-and-such sense-data.

In 1903 Russell allows that I am acquainted with Smith. In 1912 he does not allow that and instead argues that I am only acquainted with the sense-data that make up the appearance of Smith. Acquaintance, if you will, comes on a sliding scale, and Russell has moved the scale so that we no longer can be acquainted with ordinary objects and so we cannot have singular thoughts about them.

In 1912 Russell writes:

Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions. That is to say, the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description.

So, proper acquaintance allows for a type of thought, and it is the type of thought that determines whether a thought is singular or not. A singular thought is not descriptive in nature.

Decades later, most direct reference theorists moved the acquaintance scale in the other direction, claiming that we can have singular thoughts about objects provided that they are at the end of a causal chain of a name that we have acquired. When doing so they gave up Russell’s initial requirement that acquaintance requires, at minimum, that one perceive the relevant object. Other allow for singular thoughts of objects when we are only familiar with causal traces of it, such as a footprint, provided that some additional constraints are met. And some allow that we can introduce a name with a uniquely identifying description and thereby come to have a singular thought about the object so named. The question then remains, can such relaxed requirements satisfy Russell’s main criteria and result in a thought of an object that is not descriptive?
Constraints on Singular Thoughts

Sarah Sawyer has listed three constraints that guide the various views on singular thoughts:

- **Content constraint:** the object is thought about directly and not descriptively.
- **Metaphysical constraint:** there is an object thought about.
- **Epistemic constraint:** the subject is acquainted with the object thought about.\(^5\)

A quick review reveals that there is little agreement about Sawyer’s constraints. Robin Jeshion rejects both the epistemic and the metaphysical constraints, as she claims that one can have singular thought about something that does not exist. When discussing the case where Leverrier introduces the name ‘Vulcan’ and then entertains a thought such as “Vulcan is a planet” she writes “Intuitively, it seems to me... plausible to hold that [the Vulcan case is an instance] in which an agent has a singular, non-descriptive belief... I wish to carve out a theory that respects these intuitions”\(^6\).

Francois Recanati, on the other hand, denies that we can have a successful empty singular thought, but claims that we can have the vehicle for singular thought in an empty case. Both Jeshion and Recanati make singular thoughts dependent on mental files.\(^7\)

Semantic instrumentalists about singular thought maintain that it is sufficient for having a singular thought that one introduces a name and so they only accept the content constraint.\(^8\)

Accordingly, instrumentalists maintain that we can have singular thoughts after introducing directly referring terms by means of Kaplan’s “dthat,” and by doing so converting an arbitrary singular term into a directly referring terms, thus enabling singular thought about the terms referent.

While Robin Jeshion only accepts the content constraint above, she does add a condition that distinguishes her view from that of the instrumentalists, namely the significance condition.

- **Significance condition:** a mental file is initiated on an individual only if that individual is significant to the agent with respect to her plans, projects, affective states, motivations.\(^9\)
Recanati, on the other hand, accepts the content constraint, the metaphysical constraint, as well as a modified version of the epistemic constraint, namely

*Epistemic constraint*\(_{FR}\): the subject is acquainted with or correctly anticipates becoming acquainted with the object thought about.

The modified epistemic constraint allows one to acquainted with an object by being on the receiving end of a causal chain of names that stretches back to that object. Additionally, it allows one to have singular thoughts about objects one is not acquainted with provided that one will be appropriately acquainted with it at some point. For example, when Leverrier hypothesized that Neptune exists then Recanati claims that he has a singular thought when thinking, for example, “Neptune is a planet.” The reason Recanati gives is that ‘Neptune’ is a referring name and so the resulting thought is truth-evaluative and as such qualifies as a singular thought, and Leverrier did perceive the planet during his days.

While rejecting the epistemic requirement is the norm for semantic instrumentalists, advocates of the direct reference view have a history of accepting a very weak version of the requirement. Consider the following example. I am looking over the list of students in my class. I have not met any of the students and have never had any contact with them. As I look at the list I think to myself, “Jessica Alba is taking my class,” ‘Jessica Alba’ being the first name on the roster. It is commonly accepted by direct reference theorists that I have a singular thought about Jessica, the reason being that the name is passed on to me via a causal chain following a baptism, and that I intend to use the name with the same reference as those I acquired it from. As Nathan Salmon points out

The *de re* connection need not be direct and intimate; it may be remote and indirect, perhaps consisting of a network of causal intermediaries interposed between the cognizer and the object.
Some of the advocates of this view, which I have called the orthodox view, are Nathan Salmon, Kent Bach, Scott Soames, Robin Jeshion, and Keith Donnellan, to name a few.\textsuperscript{11}

For direct reference theorists accepting or sincerely assenting to a sentence that expresses a singular proposition is generally deemed sufficient for having a singular thought. Accordingly, when I hear from what I take to be a reliable source that Thales was a philosopher, then I come to believe a singular proposition containing Thales as a constituent and so come to have a singular thought about Thales. The advocates of the orthodox view are therefore likely to accept all three of Sawyer’s constraints. The metaphysical constraint, which appears to cause problems with cases of apparently empty names such as ‘Vulcan’ and ‘Santa Claus’ are frequently dealt with by introducing literary, theoretical, and/or imaginary objects that, in some sense, exist.\textsuperscript{12}

While the orthodox view makes singular thoughts object dependent, Tim Crane, Mark Sainsbury, and Jody Azzouni, in addition to Jeshion, want to allow singular thoughts about objects that do not exist.\textsuperscript{13} Given the plausibility of their views it certainly seems that any characterization one gives of singular thoughts should, contrary to Sawyer’s criteria, be open to the possibility of such thoughts not being object dependent.

\textbf{A minimal criteria for singular thought}

There is no uncontroversial account of singular thoughts to be found in recent literature. The orthodox view accounts for singular thoughts in terms of content, where singular thoughts are mental states with singular as opposed to general content. During the last several decades this idea has been captured with directly referring terms contributing objects to the propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur and that being contrasted with general or descriptive propositions.

Thus, the sentence

1. Obama is a former president of the United States
is understood as expressing a proposition that can be represented as an ordered couple consisting of Obama and the property of being a former president of the United States, namely <Obama, being former president of the United States>.

The orthodox account is not without problems. First, it makes singular thoughts object dependent. The object thought of has to, or had to exist. This, however, has been challenged by not only Jeshion, but also by Azzouni, Crane and Sainsbury. Second, it allows for a very weak acquaintance relation, namely a name passed on with the intent that it continue to refer to the same object providing sufficiently strong acquaintance relation for one having singular thought. One has to wonder how such weak relation can provide one who so acquires a name with non-descriptive content instead of, e.g., metalinguistic content such as “the person I heard about from so-and-so” or “the person named so-and-so.”

When moving on we need an account of singular vs general thought that is useful and at the same time does not come with too much theoretical baggage. For example, it is preferable that such an account not saddle one with a commitment to mental files and/or metaphysical presuppositions about the objects of thought. I suggest that a minimal criteria be based on the general ideas captured by, respectively, description based and direct based accounts of reference. Description theories of reference argue that reference is secured by a net cast by descriptions, where the object referred to is the one that best satisfies the descriptions. The direct reference advocate rejects such an account and argues instead that reference is secured without an object satisfying such descriptions. Similarly, a general thought can be viewed as one where the object is thought about in terms of being a possessor of a certain set of properties that it then satisfies. A singular thought, in contrast, is not thought of in such a way. In that sense singular thought is not satisfactional. This, I believe, comes close to Russell’s initial criteria when he explained that when the thought in the mind of a person
using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description, then the thought is not a singular thought.

**Reference and thought according to the orthodox view**

The direct reference theory provides the backbone of the orthodox view. According to the direct reference theory a reference of a name is not determined by how an object fits a given set of descriptions. Instead, reference is secured via a causal chain, where one user of a name passes it on to another who then intends to use it with the same reference. The reference of the name is therefore not satisfactional. Because the reference of the name is not satisfactional the advocates of the orthodox view have been quick to conclude that the thought that results from sincerely assenting to a simple sentence that contains the name of an object, and the thought that one reports with an embedded simple sentence containing the name, is a singular thought. Consequently, since ‘Obama’ is a referring proper name, if John sincerely assents to (1) then the claim is that John has a singular thought about Obama. Similarly, were John to utter

2. I believe that Obama is a former president of the United States

then the claim is that it clearly indicates that John has a singular thought about Obama. The claim is the same even if the name is of someone that John is only acquainted with via the name. If John were to sincerely assent to

3. Thales was a philosopher

then the advocates of the orthodox view would take that as a clear indication that he has a singular thought about Thales. Being on the receiving end of the causal chain of a name, according to the orthodox view, is acquaintance enough for having a singular thought about the relevant object. The point is succinctly made by Marleen Rozemond in the following quote:
(Kripke) points out that many people who use the name ‘Feynman’ only know that Feynman is an important physicist. Yet they manage to refer to him by using the name…It seems clear…that they can have de re (singular) thoughts about Feynman by virtue of a causal chain going from their use of a name to a famous physicist.\(^\text{15}\)

Robin Jeshion shares Rozemond’s understanding. She puts the point as follows: “If you finally met me, would you thereby better understand the term ‘Robin Jeshion’? Surely this is something that the Millian denies.”\(^\text{16}\) Again, the point is that according to the advocates of the orthodox view there is no “additional meaning” beyond what is referred to found in names and so there is no “additional understanding” to be had once one has acquired the name. Acquiring a name of an object enables one to have singular thoughts about it.

Rozemond and Jeshion seem to be echoing a point made earlier by Kent Bach when he argued that when a name is passed on “a speaker cannot just express but can actually display his de re way of thinking of the object and thereby enable the hearer to think of it in the same way.”\(^\text{17}\) However, when Bach explains what he means by someone displaying his way of thinking it is clear that he is assuming that the preservation of reference of a name passes on a de re, or a non-descriptive way of thinking as well. He writes “Since the hearer’s mental token of the name ‘inherits’ the same object as the speaker’s, the object of the hearer’s thought is determined relationally, not satisfactionally.”\(^\text{18}\) The underlying assumption that Bach appears to be working with is the following:

\textit{The testimony requirement}: A sufficient condition for one having a singular thought of an object is that one acquire a name of the object, the name having been initially introduced with an acquaintance relation.\(^\text{19}\)

Note that the requirement allows one to be on the receiving end of a long chain of use, stretching back to an initial baptism, and still have singular thought about the object named.
Suppose that Bach tells me about his new neighbor, Travis, and informs me that Travis is newly retired. I pick up the name and form the appropriate belief that I can express by saying that Travis is retired. According to Bach he has displayed his way of thinking about Travis to me and so I now have singular thoughts about Travis. But let us look again at Russell’s basic criteria for one having singular thought. Can I express my thought about Travis properly without resorting to descriptions? And the answer appears to be no. The only thoughts I have about Travis appear to be descriptive, including thoughts such as “Bach’s new and newly retired neighbor.” Bach, having interacted with Travis, presumably has a wealth of non-descriptive thoughts about him, but none of them are displayed to me or passed on to me with the simple passing on of a name.

Gareth Evans provides an example that clearly questions Bach’s account of displaying or inheriting a way of thinking via the use of names as well as Jeshion’s claim about understanding names. Suppose that person X joins a group that is talking about a certain Louis. X listens in for a while and then joins in the conversation with appropriate uses of the name ‘Louis’. It certainly seems that he is, when doing so, successful in referring to the same Louis that his friends are talking about. The discussion is about King Louis XIII. If that is so then Jeshion, as well as most Millians, are committed to attributing to X singular thoughts about Louis XIII. Suppose now that due to some massive errors X comes away from the discussion believing that Louis is a basketball player, Evans comments on this:

[N]otice how little point there is in saying that he (entertains a singular thought about) one French king rather than another, or any other person named by the name. There is now nothing the speaker is prepared to say or do which relates him differentially to the one King. This is why it is so outrageous to say that he believes that Louis XIII is a basketball player. The notion of (singular thought) has simply been severed from all the connections that made it of interest.
It appears to me that Evans is pulling on the right intuitions here. Even though the subject in his story comes away using the name ‘Louis’ it is questionable that he came away with singular thoughts about Louis. Again, even though the name is passed on, singular thought is not.

We now have on the one hand the orthodox view that requires a very weak acquaintance relation for singular thoughts, namely one that can be satisfied by the proper acquisition of a name, and on the other hand we have Evans’ example and the example of Bach’s new neighbor, both of which suggest that the account is too permissive. The advocates of the orthodox view accept The Testimony Requirement while Evans clearly rejects it. The advocates of the orthodox view offer as a support for their view the direct reference claim that all there is to the meaning of a name is its referent, while Evans’ example and the example of Bach’s new neighbor provide intuitive support for one acquiring a name not being sufficient to have a singular thought about the object named. There is a way to explain the intuitions that drive Evans’ example and the example of Bach’s neighbor while accommodating the direct reference view, but The Testimony Requirement falls by the wayside as a result.

Jeshion claimed that a Millian should maintain that he doesn’t understand her name any better after meeting her than he did before doing so. That, I believe, is not right. A Millian who has never met Jeshion should argue that he does understand the name ‘Robin Jeshion’ better after meeting her than he did before doing so. Before meeting her he had a general understanding of the name, that is, he knew the semantic role the name plays as a proper name which suffices to enable him to use the name competently. Having a general understanding of a name is sufficient to use the name successfully and competently as a referring device. But since he did not know who the referent was he did not have a specific understanding of the name, that is, he did not know that it was this very individual who was the semantic value of the name. Since he has specific understanding and general
understanding of the name ‘Robin Jeshion’ after meeting her, he now has a better understanding of it than he did before meeting her.

When a name is passed on without the hearer being otherwise acquainted with the named object then the hearer can only have a general understanding of the name. While having general understanding may suffice to successfully use the name in a public language it may be insufficient to provide one with singular thoughts. It is not until one acquires specific understanding of the name that one is in a position to have singular thoughts of the object it refers to, i.e., thoughts that are not descriptive in nature. The understanding that makes singular thoughts interesting and relevant is to be found in the specific understanding of names.

When I have a general understanding of a name, then I can use it competently and appropriately to refer to its bearer. I might even have some descriptive beliefs about the object named filed away. The descriptions might not reveal much about the object. Instead, they might be very general in nature, such as descriptions to the effect that I acquired the name in a recent conversation with my friends and, as in the case of Evans’ X, many of the beliefs might be false. However, the competent use of a name does not entail that one has a non-satisfactional representation of the bearer of the name in any interesting way. Such representation typically requires one perceiving the object. And while a proper name refers to its bearer in a non-satisfactional way, a speaker does not display (in the sense of showing or passing on non-satisfactional ways of thinking about an object) how she represents an object when using that name. A simple example should suffice. When I utter “Arya is fast,” speaking to a person who is hearing the name ‘Arya’ for the first time and who knows nothing about Arya, then I have not displayed or shown or indicated how I think about Arya. When uttering the sentence I have not even indicated to my listener that she is a dog. And were I to indicate that she is a dog, uttering for example “Arya is fast for a dog,” then I have not displayed or revealed when saying so what kind of a dog she is nor
have I indicated what she is fast at doing. In fact, my use of a proper name when passing it on to a
new user generally does not display or indicate or show how I think about its bearer. Here the
predicates and context are more helpful for a listener. Even so, the resulting thought will not be a
non-satisfactional thought about Arya. Instead the listener will have descriptive thoughts about her,
such as “the dog I talked about with so-and-so” or “the fast dog.”

The Testimony Requirement assumes that it is sufficient for one to have a general
understanding of a name in order to have a singular thought about the object named. But the
distinction between general and specific understanding of names explains the appeal of Evans’
example as well as the example of Bach’s neighbor. While the subjects in the examples had general
understanding of the name ‘Louis’ and ‘Travis’, they did not have specific understanding of the
names. Having general understanding of a name is not sufficient for one having singular thought
about the object named as such understanding only provides general thoughts. While the causal
connection between an object named and the use of the relevant name secures non-satisfactional
reference, it does not provide the information needed for one to have non-satisfactional thoughts,
singular thoughts, of the object named. Something more is required for that.

Given the above it should be clear that acquiring names via testimony is not sufficient for
acquiring singular thoughts as generally assumed by the advocates of the orthodox view. It is fairly
evident that so acquiring names is as well not a necessary condition for singular thoughts as one can
have singular thoughts about something without having a name for that object. I can, for example,
have singular thoughts about a soccer ball that I am trying to juggle without me having a name for
the ball and even without formulating any thoughts that explicitly use names or indexicals to refer to
it.

Several philosophers have suggested that causal connections other than the one required by
testimony is sufficient for one having singular thoughts about objects. For example, Jeshion and
Recanati allow that Leverrier have singular thoughts about Neptune without ever perceiving the planet. It suffices, on their account, that he has seen the appropriate causal traces of Neptune, namely the perturbations in the orbit of nearby known planets and that, of course, he satisfies Jeshion’s significance condition and Recanati’s requirement that he later become more directly acquainted with it. Similarly, one can, some suggest, have a singular thought about a nearby bear even though one has only encountered the bear’s scat. Upon seeing the fresh scat one might think “he is close to us,” thus entertaining a singular thought about the bear.

Relying on causal connections of the kind described above is not likely to be helpful in clarifying the nature of singular thought. First, if we view causal connections as necessary requirements for one having singular thoughts, then that automatically excludes singular thoughts of creatures of fiction, myth, and imagination. At this point we should still be open to the possibility of one having singular thoughts about some of those. Second, if we admit causal connections as sufficient requirements for singular thought, then that is much too permissive. I am causally connected to the person who finalized the online purchase of the endnote program that I am currently using, I am causally connected with the person who drove my car off the assembly lot wherever it was assembled, I am causally connected with the person I never see who assembled my hamburger at a drive-through, and I am causally connected with the person who made the final inspection of the shirt that I am wearing. Such connections do not enable me to have singular thoughts about the relevant people, regardless of how much I otherwise care about them.

**Strong acquaintance and conscious attention**

Testimony and causal connections are too weak and too general to provide one with singular thoughts. While passing on a name secures reference and provides a general understanding of a name, it does not provide a non-descriptive representation of the object named. And we are
causally connected in one way or another to most things in the world. Even if the causal connections are as close as the out-of-sight person who assembles my burger at a drive-through that does not suffice for me to have singular thoughts about that person.

Someone might suggest at this point that we might resort to referential use of descriptions and so allowing singular thoughts to be descriptive. The idea would then be that I can employ the distinction between referential and attributive uses of descriptions to appropriately connect with the object of thought. For example, while it appears that I cannot have a singular thought about the person who assembled my burger, I might use the description “the person who assembled this burger” referentially to pick out that very person. But this approach will not work. When Keith Donnellan introduced the referential/attributive distinction then one of the important differences between the examples of the two uses was that one could identify the referent when one used a description referentially as this very person/object. In the case of attributive uses, on the other hand, the referent could not be so identified. Instead one referred to the object or person who fit the description whatever or whoever it is. My use of the description “the person who assembled this burger,” in this light, has to be attributive. It is no different from my use of “the person who drove my car off the assembly lot” in the regard that I cannot identify the person beyond that. It is the person who fits the description whoever it is.

In the non-controversial cases of singular thoughts of existing objects the one having the thought has perceived the object the thought is of. It is not controversial that I have singular thoughts about my spouse, my parents who raised me, my children whom I helped raise, and the soccer ball that I regularly try to juggle with less than stellar results. In each of these cases I am directly acquainted with the relevant objects. That is, I have perceived them. But the non-controversial examples are also examples of objects that I have paid conscious attention to, that is, the kind of attention that allows me to indicate that it is directed at this very object, and they thus
satisfy what I think is a second necessary condition for one having singular thoughts of existing objects. The examples below show why perceiving an object and paying attention to it is not sufficient for one having singular thoughts about it and why conscious attention is needed as well.

Consider first an example that most have encountered in some form, where I drive or walk some distance towards my destination. Once I safely arrive at my destination I realize that I cannot recall what I encountered on my way there. Clearly I was paying some kind of attention to my environment and there is a clear sense in which I perceived various obstacles as I managed not to run into them as I was able to navigate towards my destination. But this kind of a focused attention is not the kind of attention that allows one to acquire singular thoughts about various objects that one encounters. While I clearly perceived various objects on my way and paid enough attention to them not to run into them or stumble over them, I cannot recall any of them once I reach my destination. I have no current representation of these objects and no beliefs about them.

Or consider an example of a face in the crowd. When I encounter a crowd of people I might scan the crowd and take in its size and diversity. When doing so I might not pay attention to any particular individual. While I might have singular thoughts about the crowd at this point, I do not have singular thoughts about any of its members. That changes when I, for some reason, focus on one particular face in the crowd. At that point I am paying conscious attention to that very person and so I am able to have singular thoughts about that person. When paying such attention to the face in the crowd I satisfy how Monemayor and Haladjian characterize conscious attention; namely as one that “requires a demonstrative awareness of attending to a specific object (e.g., ‘that’ or ‘this’ object). Such attention also entails voluntarily maintaining attention to an external object that has been perceptually selected.” On their account conscious attention must include contents that are available for thought and report. The kind of attention that I paid to my environment when driving to my destination did now provide me with content that was available for thought and report and so
I was not paying conscious attention to my environment at the time. While scanning the crowd does provide me with content that is available for thought and report, it is only when I focus my attention on a specific person that I can attend to that person specifically. Conscious attention paid to that person enables me to have singular thoughts, non-satisfactional thoughts, about the person.

If conscious attention to an object is required for singular thought, then that entails that me seeing bear scat does not enable me to have singular thoughts about the bear who left it there. While I have perceived the scat I have not perceived the bear and not paid conscious attention to the bear itself. All I have experienced are some causal traces left by the bear. If I am to have non-satisfactional thoughts, singular thoughts, about the bear, then my perceptual experiences need to be grounded in the bear itself and I need to pay appropriate attention to it. Until I do so my thoughts of it are general (e.g., “the bear that left the scat”), not singular, and my attempted references to it are attributive in nature. I refer to the bear that left the scat, whatever bear that is.

Those who have claimed that one can have singular thoughts about an object by being on the receiving end of a causal chain of names advocate a view that admits of very weak causal traces being sufficient to acquire singular thoughts. But, as we have seen, the main reason given for accepting that view is that reference is secured via the causal chain. As I have argued we can accommodate that view by acknowledging that one can acquire a general understanding of the relevant name that way, but not specific understanding. General understanding gives us general thoughts. More is needed for one to acquire singular thought.

The direct reference theorist can at this point object and point out that surely the use of names provides information when passed on and that when we have coreferring names it makes a difference which name is used. The fact that different coreferring names can have different cognitive significance, they might claim, surely indicates that they in some way provide a mode of presentation
of the object named. It is that function, they might suggest, that allows one to have singular thoughts about the object named when one acquires a name for it.

The objection in the previous paragraph is a serious one. In the next section I will provide a brief account of the psychological role that names play that explains, for example, why it makes a difference which of two coreferring names one uses. The account will rely on mental files, but it will do so without making singular thoughts dependent on mental files as do, for example, Jeshion and Recanati.

The psychological role of mental files

There is some empirical support for the view that we do form different folders or files in which we store information about objects. When subjects learn, for example, that “James Bartlett rescued the kitten,” then the suggestion is that a James Bartlett file is formed and the information rescued the kitten is placed in that file. Suppose then that the subjects are given some information about a lawyer so that they form The Lawyer file. Eventually the subjects are told that James Bartlett is the lawyer. In spite of now knowing the relevant identity, namely that James Bartlett is the lawyer, it takes the subjects longer to verify “The lawyer rescued the kitten” (which they had not seen before) than it took them to verify that “James Bartlett rescued the kitten,” (which they had seen before). However, if the subjects are told up front that James Bartlett is the lawyer (instead of them being told so after being given information about James Bartlett and the lawyer while the subject does not know that they are the same person), and then told that “James Bartlett rescued the kitten,” then the subjects are about as quick to verify “The lawyer rescued the kitten” as they are to verify “James Bartlett rescued the kitten.” This provides some empirical evidence for the claim that people form different files in which they store information.29
Many philosophers have adopted the view that information is organized in mental files. However, many have also ascribed additional functions to these files. For example, Jesion, Recanati, and Crain have all argued that mental files play an essential role in accounting for singular thought. While I have argued elsewhere that pooling information about individuals is essential to explain many of the cognitive puzzles that face the direct reference theory, I argue for an account of mental files for reasons that have nothing to do with singular thoughts. Instead the files are needed because of cognitive puzzles facing the direct reference theory. Mental files can also be used when explaining the role that names play when we are communicating about objects and passing on information about them.

The file analogy is misleading in the sense that it might indicate that all information in the file is equally accessible. But that is not the case. When I think about people or objects then some information is readily available and other information is not readily available. In some cases I even have to think hard about whether some person has a given property even though I can easily recall other information about that person. Even if I know someone well there tends to be a cluster of information that is more readily available and is likely to characterize how I think about that person. What information I am likely to draw from depends on several factors, including my experiences and interactions with the person in addition to what I am likely to pay attention to when so interacting.

Borrowing loosely from Quine I suggest that information that we place in files is web-like. That is, some information, typically the information that we take to be characteristic of an individual or object, or information that we pay particular attention to, is at the center of the web while other information that we might think is less important or for some reason we do not pay much attention to is not at the center. For example, it is likely that central to most chess enthusiasts’ webs for Garry Kasparov is information such as him having been a world champion of chess, being an aggressive
player, being innovative over the board, and being the youngest world chess champion to date. It is probably less central to most people’s webs about him that he took his mother's last name, what size shoes he wears, that he has an interest in soccer, and that he has taken interest in Russian politics.

In general, information that a person S has about an object X consists of descriptions, predicates, and representations that S takes to be true of X, or accurately reflect how X is. Most chess enthusiasts are therefore likely to have at least some information about Kasparov that is couched in predicates, such as that he was a world champion, that he is an aggressive player, and that he has taken an interest in Russian politics.” Some information might be couched in descriptions, such as “the most complete chess player in recent history,” “the chess player formerly known as Weinstein,” “the player who won the world title from Karpov.” Finally, some information might not be linguistic in nature, but might instead be couched in, for example, pictures, sounds, moods, to name a few possibilities. For example, when thinking of Kasparov I might recall his intense expression when focusing over the board, his animated behavior when playing, or I might recall a picture of him vacationing on a beach at the Black Sea.

While the previous examples of information on Kasparov are likely to be included in every chess fan’s file on Kasparov, not everyone has much interest in Kasparov’s chess career. Once Kasparov retired from chess he became active in politics and a staunch critic of Vladimir Putin. Putin’s mental file on Kasparov is likely to contain numerous information on his political activism and that information is likely to be at the center of Putin’s information web on Kasparov. Accordingly, the information elicited from Putin’s Kasparov file is likely to differ significantly from the information elicited from that of a typical chess fan. While a chess fan is likely to picture Kasparov at a chess board, Putin is more likely to picture him at a political rally.

If we have more than one file about a particular object then we tend to combine the files once we learn of the relevant identity. But there are exceptions. Even when we know that Clark
Kent is Superman (and here I am assuming that they exist, sidestepping the issue of empty names), we have very good reasons to keep the Clark Kent file and the Superman file separate given that the two are so different and given that we expect such different behavior from the two of them.

One of the roles that names play is to serve as markers for files. That is, a name direct us to the appropriate file. We can then elicit information from or add information to the relevant file. For example, the name ‘Superman’ directs me to my Superman file and the name ‘Clark Kent’ directs me to my Clark Kent file. Given that the information in the files are very different, the resulting information that are elicited from the respective files are very different. Granted, for the Millian, the proposition expressed by “Superman saved us from a falling meteor” is the same that the one expressed by “Clark Kent saved us from a falling meteor.” But the information elicited by the two sentences is very different due to the different names used in the sentences accessing different files. For example, the latter sentence, but not the former, indicates misleadingly that Clark Kent saved us in his Clark Kent guise, since ‘Clark Kent’ accesses the file containing information about the drab journalist.

The framework provided above makes it clear both that names matter and how they matter when it comes to information. Names play a psychological role in addition to their semantic role. While it might seem to us that my use of a name indicates how I think of the object named, the explanation that I have provided rejects that account. Instead, my use of a name elicits information from my listeners file about the relevant object. The name directs my listener to the appropriate file and so helps my listener access information she has about the object. What information is recalled depends on what information my listener has about the object referred to and how my listener organizes the information, namely what information my listener has placed at the center of the information web.
The account of mental files that I have presented meshes well with the distinction between general and specific understanding of names. When one has a general understanding of names then one does not know that the name refers to *this very* individual. Instead one can know that the name refers to the individual so named, the individual we are discussing, the individual so baptized, to name some examples. General understanding of a name provides one with general information and general thoughts, not singular thoughts. Nevertheless, this information is pooled in the appropriate mental file as they are information about the individual so named. When one acquires specific understanding of the name then one is in a position to know that *this very individual* is the one named and such knowledge requires perception. Perception provides different kind of information than does the general descriptive information associated with general understanding of names. But as the general information, the information gained via perception is also pooled in the appropriate mental file. It is the *kind of information* available that enables singular thought and not the fact that the information is stored in a file.

**Taking Stock**

Someone might object at this point that I have restricted singular thoughts too much; that it is too hard to acquire singular thoughts. And it is true that the view presented here is more restrictive than those of Jeshion, who gives up the acquaintance requirement,32 Crane, who accepts Jeshion’s intuitions regarding acquaintance,33 and Recanati, who advocates very weak epistemic relations,34 to name a few. But the view I have presented restricts the scope of singular thoughts in a very similar way to Russell’s 1903 view. That is, singular thoughts are non-descriptive thoughts, one can have singular thoughts of ordinary objects, and one needs to be acquainted with (have perceived) such objects in order to have singular thoughts about them. Any other relationship results in descriptive thoughts.
I have argued that singular thoughts are thoughts that involve a special kind of representation, namely non-descriptive representation and that when it comes to ordinary objects one needs to pay conscious attention to an object in order to acquire such thoughts. While I have not discussed singular thoughts of that which does not exist, the view is open to those being possible. One can have singular thoughts of that which does not exist provided that one can have non-descriptive thoughts of that which does not exist.

Finally, the view presented here has consequences for one believing singular propositions. Singular propositions contain the object referred to. However, the view I have advocated entails that quite frequently we don’t grasp a non-descriptive mode of presentation of the relevant object. Instead, we likely replace the name with a description, thus coming to believe a general proposition. If, after meeting Smith, someone tells me that he is married to Triphena, then, as Russell observed in 1903, my thought that Triphena is not present is a general thought more appropriately expressed as “Smith’s wife is not present.”

**Concluding remarks**

I have argued that the advocates the orthodox view have not provided good reasons for believing that successfully passing on a proper name enables singular thought of the object named. Passing on a name can provide the recipient with a general understanding of the name, but not specific understanding. That is, when acquiring the name the recipient may not learn the identity of the object named as *this very object*. For that we need strong acquaintance as well as the right kind of attention. While names do play an important role in communication when passing on information the explanation is not, as Bach would have it, that the name displays how the object is thought about. A more plausible explanation of the role names play in the processing of information relies on mental files storing information about objects and the relevant names accessing or directing us to
the appropriate file to store and/or elicit information, thus having us add information to or elicit information from the appropriate file.


3 Ibid., 192.

4 Ibid., 195.

5 Sarah Sawyer states the first constraint in terms of the object being thought about directly rather than descriptively, but that formulation carries with it some metaphysical baggage, namely that there is an object. Sarah Sawyer, "Cognitivism: A New Theory of Singular Thought?," Mind and Language 27, no. 3 (2012): 270.


7 See for example François Recanati, Mental Files (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).


12 Admittedly, most of the advocates of this approach accept some, but not all of literary, mythical, or fictional objects, thus still leaving a problem of empty names. See for example Nathan Salmon, "Nonexistence," Nous 32 (1998); "Mythical Objects," in Topics in Contemporary Philosophy 1, ed. Joseph Keim Campbell, Michael O'Rourke, and David Shier (New York: Seven Bridges, 2002). Also David Braun, "Empty Names, Fictional Names, Mythical Names," Nous 39 (2005).

Crane, The Objects of Thought; Sainsbury, Reference without Referents.


Bach, Thought and Reference, 32.

Ibid.

Granted, Jeshion would not agree with the sufficiency claim, as she would insist on at least the significance condition being satisfied as well.


I am advancing a suggestion made by Nathan Salmon in Nathan Salmon, "How to Measure the Standard Metre," in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society (1987). Salmon has suggested that there is a strong and a weak understanding of proper names, where strongly understanding "N" requires that one stand in some relevant relation to N.

Since it is not clear how exactly Salmon intended his strong and weak understanding, I am introducing the terms general and specific semantic understanding. The terms correspond roughly, at least, with Salmon’s terms.

Hansen and Ray criticize Recanati’s account of singular thought for not allowing singular thoughts of that which does not exist, and suggest that any account of singular thought should be metaphysically neutral. Carsten Hansen and Georges Rey, "Files and Singular Thoughts without Objects or Acquaintance: The Prospects of Recanati’s (and Others’) "Actualism",," Review of Philosophical Psychology 7 (2016).

Similar points have been made by Jody Azzouni and Filipe Martone. See Azzouni, "Singular Thoughts (Object-Directed Thoughts)."; Filipe Martone, "Singular Reference without Singular Thought," Manuscrito 39, no. 1 (2016).


For more on the various kinds of attention see Carlos Montemayor; Harry Haroutioun Haladjian, Consciousness, Attention, and Conscious Attention (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015).

Ibid., 229.

Ibid., 143.


See Jeshion, "Singular Thought: Acquaintance, Semantic Instrumentalism, and Cognitivism."; Recanati, Mental Files; Crane, The Objects of Thought.

For more on this see author, “Xxxx,” xxxx (xx).


Crane, The Objects of Thought, 152.

Recanati claims that, e.g., Leverrier had singular thoughts about Neptune well before Neptune was seen.