

# Singular Thought, Russellianism and Mental Files<sup>1</sup>

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## 0. Introduction

Many philosophers believe that there is a kind of thought about an object that is in some sense particularly directly about the object. I will use the terms *de re* or *singular thought* for thoughts of this sort (I'll use these interchangeably). Many papers on the subject of singular thought initially illustrate the idea of such a thought by considering a case in which a subject is visually perceiving an object and is having occurrent thoughts about the object she is perceiving.<sup>2</sup> I don't think this is a coincidence. Having occurrent thoughts about an object I am visually perceiving with the thought in some sense "directed" at the perceived object is, for the sighted believer in singular thought at least, the paradigm of a singular thought. Indeed, a main question is how to move beyond this case and characterize the conditions under which one does or can have singular thoughts. This question will be discussed subsequently. I plan to outline a broadly Russellian approach to singular thought and explore its consequences in section 1 below. In section 2 I'll critically discuss two recent attempts to explicate the notion of singular thought by means of the notion of a *mental file*.

## 1. (A certain version of) Russellianism<sup>3</sup>

As I use the term, a *Russellian* believes that propositions have as constituents objects, properties and relations. *Singular propositions* are propositions containing

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this paper was given at the Institute Jean Nicod/École Normale Supérieure on June 11, 2015. I thank the audience for helpful comments. Thanks also to Rachel Goodman, Annie Papreck King and the students in my fall 2013 Philosophy of Language graduate seminar at Rutgers for helpful comments.

<sup>2</sup> That is, her thoughts are about the object she is perceiving *qua* object she is perceiving. E.g. see Jeshion [2002] p. 53; Jeshion [2010] p. 1; Recanati [2012] p. 4; and Armstrong and Stanley [2012] p. 208 to name just a few.

<sup>3</sup> King [2015] discusses a somewhat different version of Russellianism.

objects as constituents and I'll say that a proposition that contains an object *o* as a constituent is *singular with respect to o*. Russellians have what appears to be a very natural and compelling account of singular thought: to have a singular thought about an object *o* is to have a thought whose content is a proposition that is singular with respect to *o*. I'll stipulatively call this the *Russellian Account of Singular Thought (RAST)*. For the purposes of the present paper, I'll be assuming it. It is important to be clear that I am using 'singular thought' to characterize an episode of thinking in which one thinks directly about an object *o*. So RAST says that an episode of singular thinking about *o* *just is* an event of bearing an attitude towards a proposition that is singular with respect to *o*.

I'll also be assuming that names, pronouns and indexicals are *devices of direct reference*: they contribute to propositions expressed in contexts by sentences in which they occur the objects that are their semantic values relative to the contexts. Hence, a sentence in a context containing one of these devices whose semantic value is *o* in that context expresses a proposition that is singular with respect to *o*.

Advocates of RAST who accept that pronouns, names and indexicals are directly referential are bound to think that attitude ascriptions that contain pronouns, names or indexicals in their complement clauses attribute attitudes towards propositions relative to contexts that are singular with respect to the semantic values of those expressions relative to the contexts. Similarly, advocates of RAST are bound to think that an attitude ascription in which a quantifier outside the complement clause binds a variable in it requires for its truth in a context that the subject of the ascription has an attitude towards

a singular proposition.<sup>4</sup> Hence, such an advocate of RAST will claim that these ascriptions are made true in context by the having of a *singular thought* on the part of the subject of the ascription, since RAST holds that having an attitude towards a singular proposition *just is* having a singular thought. Let's call such ascriptions *de re ascriptions*.

Finally, I assume that speaker judgments about truth-values of sentences relative to contexts and circumstances of evaluation are reliable and target the semantic contents of the sentences at the contexts.<sup>5</sup> This final addition forces our hand on Frege puzzle cases involving directly referential expressions. Speakers in a given context may well judge that 'Lois believes Clark can fly.' is false, whereas 'Lois believes Superman can fly.' is true. If speakers' judgments are reliable guides to semantic content, these sentences must have different semantic contents. I'll assume we get this result by somehow introducing *guises* into our semantics of belief ascriptions.<sup>6</sup> For my purposes, it won't matter exactly how we do this, so I won't bother attempting to spell out a particular implementation. But the crucial point is that the above two sentences (relative to a certain context) entail that Lois believes the singular proposition that Clark/Superman can fly under different guises and so can diverge in truth-value.

Let's call the package of views that combines RAST, the view that names, pronouns and indexicals are directly referential, the view that *de re* ascriptions attribute attitudes towards singular propositions, the view that judgments about truth and falsity of sentences relative to contexts and circumstances are accurate indicators of semantic

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<sup>4</sup> I am not saying the advocate of RAST *must* adopt these views, but it is very natural for her to do so. Hawthorne and Manley [2012] call the conjunction of the claims made in this sentence and the previous one HARMONY (see p. 38) and are quite sympathetic to it (see p. 52). Recanati [2010, 2012] denies it, as will be discussed below.

<sup>5</sup> This sort of view was endorsed in King and Stanley [2005] (see especially Section IV). It is also endorsed in Hawthorne and Manley [2012] p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Hawthorne and Manley [2012] dub this the *notional approach* (p. 42).

contents relative to contexts, and the view that our semantics for belief ascriptions somehow invokes guises, the *Russellian Account of Singular Thought Augmented* (RASTA). It is worth saying that though I find RASTA natural and appealing, I am here more interested in investigating the consequences of its adoption for our theory of singular thought than I am in endorsing it.

Before getting to that, there is a further feature of RASTA that is worth mentioning. In cases in which no *de re* ascription of a certain sort is true, the best explanation of that fact presumably is that the subject of the ascription has no singular thought of the relevant sort. Suppose, for example, that we are in a context in which no ascription of the form ‘Lois believes that e flies.’ is true where e is a name, indexical or pronoun whose semantic value is o in that context. Further, suppose that ‘There is someone who Lois believes flies.’ is not true in this context either. Presumably, a RASTA advocate will say that this is because Lois has no singular thought of the relevant sort to the effect that o flies.<sup>7</sup>

A first obvious consequence of RASTA is that acquaintance is not required for *de re* thought.<sup>8</sup> Hawthorne and Manley [2012] provide many sorts of cases in which e.g. an attitude ascription in which an existential quantifier outside of the complement binds a variable in the complement is judged to be true, and hence RASTA entails that an attitude towards a singular proposition is truly attributed to the subject of the ascription, but where it is implausible to think that the subject of the ascription has any acquaintance with the relevant object that the proposition is singular with respect to.<sup>9</sup> Here is one of their examples. Henry VIII commissions the construction of a large warship. He is told

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<sup>7</sup> This claim will be qualified below.

<sup>8</sup> Jeshion [2002] was an early recent defender of the view that there is acquaintanceless *de re* thought.

<sup>9</sup> See Hawthorne and Manley [2012] pp. 27-33 for a variety of examples.

by the extremely reliable builders when the great ship will be done. He hears nothing about the construction of the ship, nor does he ever visit the construction site during the period of construction. A while after the promised date of construction, Henry decides to go see the ship and is very excited about it. In fact, the ship has been completed. In such a case, 'There is a ship Henry believes he will see.' surely seems true. But this attributes belief in a singular proposition to Henry according to RASTA. According to RASTA, then, Henry has a singular thought about the ship. Yet on virtually any plausible story about acquaintance, Henry is not acquainted with the ship in question. Even if one could somehow convince oneself that in this case Henry *is* acquainted with the ship, the number and variety of examples Hawthorne and Manley consider make it very implausible that there will never be a case in which a *de re* ascription seems true and acquaintance is lacking. So I believe RASTA entails that there is so-called acquaintanceless *de re* thought.

A second obvious consequence of RASTA is that the truth conditions of *de re* ascriptions are context dependent because the same expression can invoke different guises in different contexts. Suppose Karen has met Mark Twain and considers him a great author. She has never heard of Samuel Clemens. We are in a context in which we ask Karen if Clemens is a great author to which she responds 'I have no idea. Who is he?'. In such a context, RASTA predicts that 'Karen believes that Sam Clemens is a great author' is false.<sup>10</sup> Suppose now we are in a context in which it is common ground that Twain is Clemens and in which the speakers tend to use 'Clemens' as a name for Twain/Clemens. There is a disagreement about whether Clemens is a great author. I

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<sup>10</sup> Since speakers judge it to be so and RASTA takes such judgments to be reliable guides to semantic content.

know that everyone values Karen's views about the quality of authors and I say 'Well I can tell you that Karen believes Clemens is a great author.' Here RASTA predicts the *de re* ascription is true.

The *de re* ascription here attributes to Karen a belief in the same proposition in both contexts: the singular proposition that Twain/Clemens is a great author. However, set in the two contexts the ascription differs in what guise it asserts she believes it under. So the guise under which the subject of such a *de re* ascription is claimed to believe the singular proposition is determined in context somehow. If we supposed that we introduced guises into our semantics by means of having 'believes' express a three-place relation between an individual, a proposition and a guise, the ascription above would assert that Karen stands in different *relations* to the proposition that Twain/Clemens is a great author in the two contexts in virtue of different guises being slotted into the three-place *belief* relation, yielding different two-place relations.<sup>11</sup> It is worth adding that presumably we should say the same for other attitude verbs, since we observe the same phenomenon. So far, so good.

However, there is a much more radical sort of contextual dependence that RASTA commits us to. To see this, consider an example from Sosa [1970].<sup>12</sup> There is a prominent citizen of Metropolis who suffers from pyromania. As a result, he has started a few fires. Let's call him the Metropolis Pyromaniac (MP), but let's stipulate that the police have not yet introduced a name for him.<sup>13</sup> Sordid place that it is, Metropolis has

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<sup>11</sup> We should also allow for ascriptions that don't require the proposition to be believed under any *particular* guise. On the approach presently being considered, we could achieve that effect by allowing the guise argument place in the three-place *belief* relation to be existentially quantified. Arguably, this is what is going on in the second of our two contexts involving Karen above.

<sup>12</sup> See Dorr [2011] for similar examples.

<sup>13</sup> Here I depart from Sosa's [1970] statement of the case in so far as Sosa imagines the police introduce a name for MP.

many other arsonists. But because of certain peculiarities of MP's fire starting techniques, police know when they come across one of his fires. The police have just come across a new fire and the Head Detective (HD) has determined it is the work of MP. If HD were asked by reporters whether he knew who started these fires, he would think he was speaking truly in answering 'No'. As a result, the police are in no position to make an arrest. Now consider a context in which another detective first approaches the scene of the latest fire to find HD sifting through evidence at the scene. 'Whadya think?' he says to HD. HD responds 'There is someone I suspect of having started this fire. It's the same guy who started the San Clemente and Santa Monica fires.'<sup>14</sup> I take it that we would judge the *de re* ascription to be true in this context, since HD has recognized MP's handiwork. RASTA entails that we have the attribution of an attitude towards a singular proposition here. And since the sentence seems true in this context, RASTA entails that HD believes a singular proposition regarding MP. However, now consider a different context. Suppose that after examining the most recent fire, HD holds a press conference. Reporters are eager to know if HD is in a position to make an arrest. A reporter shouts out: 'Do you have any suspects? Should we expect an arrest today?' Here 'There is someone I suspect of having started this fire.' in HD's mouth seems false and HD should respond to the question by saying 'No'. Further, we can imagine that no ascription of the form 'HD suspects e started the fire' where e is a name, demonstrative or indexical seems true in this context.<sup>15</sup> But then, it appears that RASTA is committed to the claim

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<sup>14</sup> It also seems that if MP's wife overhears this comment and knows MP started the other fires, she could truly say to MP 'HD believes you started this fire.' This is similar to Sosa's [1970] spy and accomplice example (p. 891).

<sup>15</sup> For example, suppose MP and his wife are present at the news conference. If after HD responds to the reporter's question by saying 'No', his wife turns to MP and says 'HD believes you started the latest fire.' it will seem false.

that HD does not have an attitude toward a singular proposition regarding MP. After all, as I said above in discussing Lois, RASTA will want to explain the falsity of all *de re* ascriptions of a certain sort by saying that the subject of the ascription does not have an attitude toward the relevant singular proposition. So if we come across a context in which all *de re* ascriptions of a certain sort with a given subject are false, presumably the advocate of RASTA should say that this is because the subject does not have the attitude expressed by the attitude verb in that context toward the relevant singular proposition.

But now it seems we have shown that according to RASTA, HD does and does not have an attitude towards a singular proposition about MP with no change in his relevant beliefs or cognitive connection to MP! Clearly, that cannot be right. What the advocate of RASTA should claim is that, setting aside for now issues involving the contextual sensitivity of *de re* ascriptions due to guises, what the case shows is that *de re* ascriptions are contextually sensitive in another way. For illustrative purposes, one way to think about it is that ‘suspects’ expresses different relations  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  in the above two contexts that are more or less demanding as to what is required in order for a *de re* ascription to be true. In the first context, ‘suspects’ expresses a lax relation  $S_1$  that is not very demanding. Hence, it is easy to bear it to singular propositions and HD bears  $S_1$  to the relevant singular proposition regarding MP. So the *de re* ascription is true in that context. The relation  $S_2$  expressed in the second context by ‘suspects’ is more demanding. Hence, HD does not bear this relation to the relevant singular proposition regarding MP.<sup>16</sup> So the very same *de re* ascription ends up expressing different

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<sup>16</sup> Hawthorne and Manley [2012] don’t endorse the view that it is context dependent whether a *de re* ascription is true, but they say they are sympathetic to it. They also consider but don’t endorse the view that the contextual sensitivity of *de re* ascriptions is traceable to contexts determining more or less lax standards for what it is required for such ascriptions to be true (p. 51). They do not put things in terms of



propositions in the two contexts in virtue of ‘suspects’ expressing different relations. I hasten to add that RASTA need not be committed to this *particular* way of handling the contextually sensitivity illustrated by the HD/MP story. But I think it gives one the flavor of the phenomenon and how it might be handled. Let’s call this phenomenon the *contextual sensitivity of de re ascriptions*, bearing in mind that we have seen they are contextually sensitive in a different way in virtue of expressions invoking different guises in different contexts. We can call the latter the *guise sensitivity of de re ascriptions*. The main point is that RASTA is committed to both.

But according to RASTA, how should we describe the situation regarding HD and MP in terms of HD having an attitude towards a singular proposition regarding MP, call it P, and HD having a singular thought about MP? Reverting to the idea that attitude verbs are contextually sensitive in expressing relations in context that are more or less lax in what they require for subjects to bear them to singular propositions, consider the relations  $S_1$  (lax) and  $S_2$  (more strict) expressed by ‘suspects’ in the two contexts respectively. HD bears  $S_1$  to P and fails to bear  $S_2$  to P. In virtue of the former, HD has an attitude towards a singular proposition about MP. It’s just that in the first context, ‘suspects’ expresses  $S_1$  and so the relevant *de re* ascription is true, whereas in the second context it expresses  $S_2$  and so the relevant *de re* ascriptions are all false. This means we have to qualify something that was said earlier. Earlier, we said that when all relevant *de re* ascriptions of a certain sort are false in a context, RASTA will explain this by claiming that the subject has no singular thought of the relevant sort. But it can now be seen that

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attitude verbs expressing lax or stringent relations as I have here, though they do talk of *contexts* as being more or less *relaxed*. Dorr [2011] defends the claim that what I am calling *de re* ascriptions are contextually sensitive. I am indebted to both discussions here.

all it really shows is that the subject of the ascriptions does not bear the relation expressed by the attitude verb *in that context* to any singular proposition.<sup>17</sup>

What goes for having attitudes towards singular propositions goes for having singular thoughts according to RASTA, since the latter consists in the former. In particular, since RASTA takes having attitudes towards singular propositions to be constitutive of having singular thoughts, in virtue of HD bearing the relation  $S_1$  to the singular proposition P involving MP, HD has a singular thought about MP. Again, to bear  $S_1$  to P is to have an attitude towards a singular proposition and hence to have a singular thought according to RASTA. Finally, one could if one wished talk as follows: HD has an  $S_1$  singular thought about MP (in virtue of bearing  $S_1$  to a singular proposition about MP) but not an  $S_2$  singular thought about MP. According to RASTA, the latter is shown by the falsity of all relevant *de re* ascriptions in the second of our two contexts above. Finally, this suggests that according to RASTA we have lots of singular thoughts since we likely bear lax relations like  $S_1$  to lots of singular propositions. However, in many contexts, like the second context involving HD and MP above, we will not be reporting them because our attitude verbs in those contexts express relations that it is more difficult to bear to singular propositions than it is to bear  $S_1$  to them. It is as though in those contexts we ignore singular thoughts involving lax relations to singular propositions. In such contexts, it could seem to conversational participants that for all the world the subject of the relevant ascriptions has no singular thoughts about the relevant object.

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<sup>17</sup> I assume here that which relation the attitude verb expresses does not change across the *de re* ascriptions we consider. Were that to happen, we should probably think of the context as having shifted.

What is it about context that determines whether an attitude verb expresses a lax relation that it is easy to bear to singular propositions or a more stringent one? A reasonable thing to say is that the interests of speakers and hearers in a given context make it more or less useful to ascribe a thought directly about an object—a singular thought—to someone.<sup>18</sup> If speakers' and hearers' interests in a given context make it useful to ascribe a singular thought to an individual, the relevant attitude verb expresses a sufficiently lax relation and the relevant *de re* ascriptions will be true in that context.<sup>19</sup> And indeed, this seems to be what is going on in the Metropolis case just considered. Why in the first context is it useful to ascribe a singular thought about MP to HD? I think the answer has to be something like this. In the first context speakers and hearers were focused on HD obtaining information about the most recent fire and how it might help to catch the culprit who started it. That is what they were interested in. By determining that the most recent fire was set by the same person who set previous fires, HD obtains a lot of information that could be useful in catching him. He learns where the culprit was on various other occasions, that he likes to light fires in certain kinds of place, that the evidence from any of the fires he set is evidence about the same person, and so on. Since it is the particular culprit that unites the fire locations, the kinds of place the fires

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<sup>18</sup> Sosa [1970] suggests that whether a singular term  $\alpha$  (which includes definite descriptions for Sosa) is *exportable* (whether we can move from 'S believes that  $\alpha$  is F' to 'S believes about x that it is F') depends (in part) on the interests of speakers and hearers. But in the end he settles for the view that singular terms are always exportable. In a footnote, Kaplan [1989] suggests the view that whether a quantifying in ascription is "correct" depends on features of the conversational context (p. 605 note 95): "The first sort of problem involves understanding the conditions under which we correctly ascribe to Holmes, for example, the *de re* attitude that there is someone whom he believes committed the murder. It seems clear that the mere fact that the murderer has given himself a *nom de crime* and leaves a message using this name should not suffice. (*In fact, I suspect that there are no fixed conditions, only conditions relative to the topic, interests, aims and presuppositions of a particular discourse.*)" (my emphasis)

<sup>19</sup> What I probably really want to say here is that *speakers' recognizable intentions* determine which relation is expressed by an attitude verb but that such speaker intentions track the interests of speakers and hearers. So changes in those interests result in changes in (recognizable) speaker intentions and so changes in which relation a verb expresses. But for ease of exposition, I'll ignore this complication here. See King [2014a, 2014b, 2013].

occurred, and the evidence from the fires, it serves the interests in question to take HD to be very directly cognitively focused on a particular person: the person who was at the various locations, likes to light fires in certain kinds of places and left the evidence at the various locations. Hence, the relevant attitude verbs express relations in that context that it is easy to bear to singular propositions and so the relevant *de re* ascriptions are true in that context. In the case of the second context, speakers and hearers are interested in whether HD has enough information to arrest the individual responsible for setting the fires. HD is not even close to possessing such information. Thus, given speakers' and hearers' interests in this context, the relevant attitude verbs express relations that it is harder to bear to singular propositions than it is to bear  $S_1$  to them. Hence, the relevant *de re* ascriptions in that context are false.

Consider another example.<sup>20</sup> Suppose Glenn believes all politicians are corrupt. I meet the mayor of San Diego, Bob, at a party. Glenn has never met or heard of Bob. I can truly say to him 'Glenn believes you are corrupt.' I can also truly say to someone else at the party (pointing at Bob) 'Glenn believes he is corrupt.' or 'There is someone at this party Glenn believes to be corrupt.' Now change the context in the following way. Glenn's boss is throwing a party as a fundraiser for a charity. Again, Glenn has never met or heard of Bob, and believes all politicians are corrupt. Glenn's boss tells Glenn and the other employees to look over the guest list, which includes Bob, and tell him if anyone corrupt is on it. The boss is adamant that should anyone fail to tell him about someone they believe to be corrupt, they will be fired. Glenn and the others look over the list and no one says anything. Alan, a conniving coworker of Glenn's who is always trying to get Glenn in trouble and who knows both Glenn's views on politicians and

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<sup>20</sup> Sosa [1970] has examples similar to the one I am about to present.

Bob's profession, says to Glenn's boss at the party pointing at Bob: 'I am surprised Glenn didn't say anything: Glenn believes he is corrupt.' This seems false in the new context, as would 'There is someone at this party Glenn believes to be corrupt.' or any other such *de re* ascription concerning Bob to the effect that Glenn believes him to be corrupt. In this case again, it seems that the difference in the speakers' and hearers' interests in the two contexts determines whether the relevant *de re* ascriptions are true or not in each context. In the first context, they were interested in what Glenn would believe about Bob were he e.g. to be introduced to Bob and told his profession. In particular, we know Glenn is disposed to form the occurrent belief that Bob is corrupt upon meeting him and being told his profession. Because speakers and hearers are focusing on this disposition and the disposition involves Bob, it is useful to take Glenn to have a direct cognitive connection to Bob. Hence the attitude verbs express lax relations and the relevant *de re* ascriptions in this context are true. In the second context, the focus is on whether Glenn's beliefs put him in a position to say something *now* about Bob's corruption. They clearly do not, since he has never met or heard of Bob. Hence, the attitude verbs express more stringent relations and the relevant *de re* ascriptions are false in this context.

Perhaps we can put a more contemporary gloss on the claim that interests of speakers and hearers in contexts (partly) determine whether *de re* ascriptions are true or false in those contexts by saying that the latter is (partly) determined by the *questions under discussion* (QUD) in the context. Since QUD are thought by many to be features of the context of utterance, we have an independently motivated feature of context to appeal to as the thing that (partly) determines whether *de re* ascriptions are true or false in

those contexts.<sup>21</sup> The idea, again, is that if the QUD in a context are well served by someone having an attitude towards a singular proposition, the attitude verbs express relations sufficiently lax for the relevant *de re* ascriptions to be true.

The argument I have given that RASTA is committed to there being acquaintanceless singular thought and to *de re* ascriptions being contextually sensitive leaned heavily on whether a given *de re* ascription seemed true. For RASTA claims that true *de re* ascriptions require attitudes towards singular propositions, and hence, according to RASTA (indeed, RAST), singular thought. And RASTA takes speakers' judgments about truth and falsity of sentences in contexts to be reliable guides to the truth-values of the semantic contents of those sentences in those contexts. This obviously amounts to giving linguistic data a very big role to play in deciding whether singular thought is present in a given case or not. To some who wish to avoid the commitments of RASTA, including acquaintanceless singular thought and the context sensitivity of *de re* ascriptions, it may appear attractive to either deny that the truth of *de re* ascriptions requires attitudes towards singular propositions or deny that speakers' judgments about truth and falsity are accurate guides to the actual truth and falsity of semantic contents.<sup>22</sup> Let me say a word about each of these denials.

As to the denying the claim that the truth of *de re* ascriptions require attitudes towards singular propositions, two points are relevant both of which are in all essentials made by Hawthorne and Manley [2012].<sup>23</sup> First, focusing on *de re* ascriptions in which

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<sup>21</sup> Again, what I really want to say is that recognizable speaker intentions determine which relation a verb of attitude expresses but that such intentions track QUDs. See note 19.

<sup>22</sup> Either option could in principle leave RAST in place: the claim that singular thought consists in having attitudes towards singular propositions.

<sup>23</sup> Recanati [2010, 2012] denies this claim (p. 168 and p. 153, respectively). Recanati thinks that he can elucidate the notion of singular thought by reference to *mental files* rather than to anything like appeals to linguistic data of the sort RASTA appeals to. Recanati's view is discussed below.

an existential quantifier outside the complement binds a variable inside it, on the semantic approach to ‘belief’ adopted by most philosophers, it expresses a relation between an individual and the proposition expressed by the complement and when the complement contains a free variable it expresses a singular proposition relative to an assignment of values to variables. Hence, on the most usual semantics such ascriptions require the subject of the ascription to have an attitude towards a singular proposition. So denying that such *de re* ascriptions require attitudes towards singular propositions requires abandoning this natural semantic approach. Surely, that is a significant cost.<sup>24</sup> Secondly, most philosophers who believe in singular thought think that it is a distinctive mental phenomenon that ordinary speakers are (or can be made) aware of. Hence, as I said at the outset, many papers on the topic introduce the phenomenon by considering a case in which a subject is visually perceiving an object while having thoughts directed at the object she is perceiving. In so doing, the authors must be assuming their readers will recognize the distinctive kind of thought they are drawing their attention to.<sup>25</sup> Further believers in singular thought think that the phenomenon is in some way significant to us (otherwise, why waste time writing about it?). But if there is such a significant and distinctive phenomenon of singular thought, it would be nothing short of shocking if it weren’t somehow systematically reflected in our practices of ascribing attitudes to each other.<sup>26</sup> RASTA embraces the claim that such practices reflect the presence of singular thought by claiming that *de re* ascriptions require attitudes toward singular propositions for their truth and that having attitudes towards singular propositions *is* having singular thought. To deny the former without putting anything comparable in its place is to give

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<sup>24</sup> Hawthorne and Manley [2012] p. 52 make essentially this point.

<sup>25</sup> See note 2.

<sup>26</sup> Hawthorne and Manley [2012] p. 4 make a closely related point.

up on the idea that singular thought is reflected in some systematic way in our practice of ascribing attitudes to each other. This just looks to me implausible on its face. How could singular thought be at all distinctive and significant if it isn't even reflected in the way we talk about each other's thoughts? For myself, if I were to conclude that no such category as that of singular thought were systematically reflected in our own talk about each other's thoughts, that would give me a very strong reason to doubt that there is any substantial, significant notion of singular thought!

As to denying that speakers' judgments about truth and falsity are reliable guides to truth and falsity of semantic content (relative to context), I admit that such judgments are not *completely* reliable. But the more one departs from the view that such judgments are by and large reliable guides to semantic content, the less evidence one has to test semantic theories against.<sup>27</sup> This risks making semantics an "anything goes" free-for-all, where all the real work gets done in "post semantics" or pragmatics. Again, surely this is a cost.

At the outset, I mentioned that the paradigm case of singular thought is a case in which in perceiving an object one has thoughts directly about the perceived thing. We have now seen that RASTA is committed to acquaintanceless singular thought and to the context dependence of *de re* ascriptions. These phenomena can seem quite remote from the paradigm case. However, it may be that there is an important difference between cases of acquaintanceless singular thought and paradigmatic cases. Above in arguing for the context dependence of *de re* ascriptions, both examples I used, that of the Metropolis Pyromaniac and that of Glenn and Bob, involved cases of acquaintanceless singular

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<sup>27</sup>See King and Stanley [2005] (especially Section IV) for this sort of line of thinking. Hawthorne and Manley [2012] (p. 35) adopt it as well.



thought on most accounts of acquaintance. In both examples, I supposed that the subjects of the belief ascriptions had no name for the objects that their singular thoughts were about. This played an important role in the claim that for each case, in one of two contexts no *de re* ascription was true. I conjecture that in all cases of acquaintanceless *de re* thought where no names for the relevant object are available to the speaker, we can find another context where no relevant *de re* ascriptions are true where there has been no relevant change in the cognitive connection between the subject of the ascription and the relevant object.

Let's me illustrate the plausibility of this claim. Consider again Hawthorne and Manley's [2012] case of Henry VIII. He commissions the construction of a ship, knows that the ship will be finished on time, and hears nothing in the interim about the construction (Henry and the ship builders both abide by the principle that no news is good news). Shortly after the day of promised completion, Henry makes plans to go to the harbor to see his new ship. In fact, the ship is finished. Hawthorne and Manley correctly claim that the sentence 'There is a ship Henry believes he will see.' is true. So according to RASTA, Henry has an attitude towards a singular proposition and so has a singular thought about the ship. I suspect that the reason the ascription is true here is that we are interested in Henry's plan to go see the ship, and his beliefs are such that he will be able to execute his plan and see the particular ship he commissioned. Hence, we have an interest in taking his beliefs to be directly about the ship, and so 'believes' expresses a lax relation in that context. Now consider the following context. As before, Henry orders the construction of the ship. However, because they know Henry likes surprises and elaborate events, the ship builders build three identical ships unbeknownst to Henry.

Before construction, Henry's name was carved on one of the three keels. Tape was placed over it and tape was put in the same place on the other three keels so that no one would know which keel bore Henry's name. The identical ships were then constructed with no one knowing which had the keel with Henry's name on it. The ship builders agreed that the ship whose keel bears Henry's name was the one he commissioned. The plan is that when Henry arrives to see his ship, to delight him the tape will be taken off all three keels to reveal which ship is Henry's. Hearing of Henry's impending visit to see his ship, some workman in the Woolwich Dockyard where the ship was built are discussing the matter. We'll use their discussions to frame the relevant context:

Marc: 'So which ship is Henry's?'

Samuel: 'I don't know; no one does'

Marc: 'Does Henry know which ship is his?'

Samuel: 'No, not even Henry. He doesn't even know there are three ships, let alone which of the three is his.'

Marc: 'So though Henry correctly believes he will see his ship, there is no ship such that Henry believes he is going to see *it*.'

Samuel: 'Yes, that's right.'

I am supposing that Henry had not yet given the ship a name, having planned on waiting until he saw it. But then it appears no *de re* ascription of the form 'Henry believes he will see e' is true in this context, where e is either a name, pronoun or indexical: e.g. if Samuel and Marc are mutually aware that they are looking at one of the ships (even if it happens to be Henry's unbeknownst to them) and Marc says 'Henry believes he will see it.' this does not seem true in this context. What happened when we shifted to the new context? I think that instead of asking whether his beliefs about the ship will allow him

to successfully execute his plan to see it as in the previous context, speakers are now focused on whether his beliefs will allow him to determine which ship is his. Since they won't, and his ship thoughts have no other very direct connection to the ship that is in fact his, in this context 'believes' expresses a more stringent relation and the claim that Henry bears this relation to a singular proposition about the ship is false.

To repeat, assuming RASTA, these cases not involving names for the relevant objects in which we find acquaintanceless *de re* thought seem to allow us to find contexts in which no relevant *de re* ascriptions are true even though there has been no change in the cognitive lives of the subjects of the ascriptions. They suggest to me that in all cases of acquaintanceless *de re* thought (where names are not in play) we can shift the context in such a way that no relevant *de re* ascriptions are true. I'll return to the restriction to cases not involving names below.

For what I want to point out now is that, assuming RASTA, in what I have called paradigmatic cases of singular thought, cases in which I am perceiving an object and occurrently entertaining thoughts in some sense directly about the object I am perceiving, we just don't seem to be able to shift the context without changing the cognitive lives of the subjects of the ascriptions in such a way that no relevant *de re* ascriptions are true. As I sit here in San Clemente, California, I am looking at my *Lost* surfboard. I am thinking how beautifully made *it* is. I am thinking about how elegant *its* lines are. I italicize the pronouns here, to emphasize that as I think these thoughts I am attending to the board and in some sense directing my occurrent thought at the object to which I am attending. This, as I said before, is a paradigmatic case of singular thought. Surely, the following are both true in my current context: 'There is an object that Jeff thinks is a

beautifully made surfboard.’; (two people mutually aware that they are attending to the board) ‘Jeff thinks *it* has elegant lines.’ Now it seems to me that we can’t change the context while keeping my perceptual and cognitive connection to the surfboard intact and get these sorts of *de re* ascriptions to go false. Of course, if we find ourselves in a skeptical context where we doubt the existence of an external world, ‘There is an object that Jeff thinks is a beautifully made surfboard.’ may seem false or doubtful to us. But that is because we are now precisely doubting that I *do* have any direct perceptual and cognitive connection to a surfboard, despite initial appearances. Surely contexts like that aren’t the ones we want to consider in deciding whether *de re* ascriptions are context dependent in any interesting way. It makes the argument that *de re* ascriptions are context dependent far too easy. *Any* ascription in which an existential quantifier outside of the complement of an attitude ascription binding variables on the inside will seem false or doubtful in such a context.<sup>28</sup> But short of considering contexts of this sort, it seems that context shifts of the sort we are considering cannot make *de re* ascriptions go false in cases of paradigmatic singular thought. The reason, given what we have said about why *de re* ascriptions can change truth-value across contexts, is that even when contexts force attitude verbs to express very stringent relations that it is hard to bear towards singular propositions, the subject of a *de re* ascription in the case of paradigm singular thought still bears those relations to singular propositions regarding the object she is perceiving. It seems to me that this is a sort of vindication of traditional, acquaintance-based ways of thinking about singular thought. In paradigmatic cases of acquaintance (looking at an object in good light, etc.), *de re* ascriptions don’t change truth-value across contexts. But

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<sup>28</sup> Maybe that isn’t *quite* right. Maybe we could think ‘There is something that Jeff believes to be beautifully made.’ would still sound true to us since we might think that there still is my inner world, and so there is *something* (sense data or etc.) that I (incorrectly) believe to be beautifully made.

then such ascriptions are in a sense distinctive and privileged, as are the singular thoughts they report. At least in paradigmatic cases, acquaintance makes a distinctive difference after all.

Above, I showed that according to RASTA, *de re* ascriptions are contextually sensitive. I focused on cases in which names for the relevant objects were not available to the subjects of the *de re* ascriptions and so used *de re* ascriptions in which existential quantifiers outside of the complements of the ascriptions bound variables inside the complements, or ascriptions in which the complements contained a pronoun or indexical. The reason for that is that sometimes ascriptions containing the relevant names and ascriptions with quantifiers quantifying in pull us in different directions with respect to the question of whether someone has an attitude toward a singular proposition. Consider the case of Henry and his new ship discussed above. For a context in which the relevant *de re* ascription was false, I appealed to a certain dialogue between dockworkers. Now consider the following variant on it, where when he commissioned the ship Henry decided it would be named ‘Henry Grace à Dieu’ and this is known to the participants in the following conversation. As before, the workers know that Henry knows the completion date has passed and that he is planning to visit to see his ship:

Marc: ‘Does Henry believe he will see Henry Grace à Dieu?’

Samuel: ‘Yes, he does.’

Marc: ‘So which ship is Henry’s?’

Samuel: ‘I don’t know; no one does’

Marc: ‘Does Henry know which ship is his?’

Samuel: ‘No, not even Henry. He doesn’t even know there are three ships, let alone which of the three is his.’

Marc: ‘So though Henry correctly believes he will see his ship, there is no ship such that Henry believes he is going to see *it*.’

Samuel: ‘Yes, that’s right.’

Both ascriptions seem perfectly acceptable. But according to RASTA, the truth of the ascription in line 1 (which Samuel affirms in line 2) requires Henry to bear whatever relation is expressed by ‘believes’ in this context towards a singular proposition involving his ship; and the truth of the ascription in the penultimate line suggests that he doesn’t bear this relation to that proposition. What to do? Could it be that there is a change of context between the first line and the penultimate line such that the *de re* ascription is true in the initial context but not in the context when the penultimate line is uttered since ‘believes’ expresses a more stringent relation in this later context than it did in the initial context? In this case, that can seem plausible. After all, if I am right that what drives the *de re* ascription going false in the one context is Henry’s inability to pick out which ship is his, and this gets established in the discourse *after* line one, it is plausible that the context when line 1 is uttered is different in the relevant way from the context when the penultimate line is uttered. However, it seems to me that in the following discourse, both ascriptions are fine as well:

Marc: ‘So which ship is Henry’s?’

Samuel: ‘I don’t know; no one does’

Marc: ‘Does Henry know which ship is his?’

Samuel: ‘No, not even Henry. He doesn’t even know there are three ships, let alone which of the three is his.’

Marc: ‘So though Henry correctly believes he will see his ship, there is no ship such that Henry believes he is going to see *it*.’

Samuel: ‘Yes, that’s right.’

Marc: ‘Didn’t Henry name the ship Henry Grace à Dieu?’

Samuel: ‘Yes, he did.’

Marc: ‘So at any rate, Henry believes he will see Henry Grace à Dieu.’

Samuel: ‘Right.’

Here the claim that the context shifts between lines five and nine seems to me considerably less plausible. For one thing, there is no obvious explanation for the shift. Presumably it would be caused by the introduction of the name of Henry’s ship into the dialogue. I suppose it could be that the fact that Marc and Samuel introduce Henry’s name for his ship and that Henry believes he will see his ship are enough to create a context in which a *de re* ascription about the ship is true. *Perhaps* this strategy could be successfully pursued, but I am skeptical.<sup>29</sup>

A second strategy for dealing with the fact that both ascriptions are true is to deny that the ascription ‘Henry believes he will see Henry Grace à Dieu’ ascribes belief in a singular proposition. Though RASTA holds that generally names are devices of direct reference, perhaps it could be claimed that in certain circumstances names make descriptive contributions to propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur. Presumably, the fact that the name was introduced prior to the existence of the ship, and hence descriptively, would play a role in the explanation as to why sentences containing it express propositions that are not singular with respect to the ship.<sup>30</sup> Of course, pursuing this strategy would require a principled, and hopefully independently motivated,

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<sup>29</sup> One worry is that if we skip the dialogue, describe the situation (they build three ships etc.) and just ask whether the two ascriptions are true, it may well be the answer is ‘Yes’. But here we can’t appeal to features of some discourse changing the context since there is no discourse.

<sup>30</sup> Even Hawthorne and Manley [2012], who think that ‘Henry Grace à Dieu’ refers to the ship once it is constructed, do not claim that it does so prior to the ship’s existence. See p. 28 notes 87 and 88.

account of the conditions under which names make descriptive contributions to propositions.<sup>31</sup> In any case, it does look like ascriptions containing names in their complements sometimes do not ascribe belief in singular propositions. For ‘Leverrier believed Vulcan perturbed the orbit of Mercury.’ is true (according to RASTA), but it cannot be that the ascription requires belief in a singular proposition for its truth given the non-existence of Vulcan.

A final strategy for reconciling our two apparently conflicting ascriptions in the above case is to hold that a quantifying in ascription in a given context may put constraints on the guise under which the subject is claimed to believe (or fail to believe) the relevant singular proposition. If we want to maintain the RASTA advocate’s view that speakers’ judgments about truth-values are accurate guides to the truth-values of semantic contents (relative to context) and if we claim that constraints on which guise a singular proposition must (not) be believed under affect such judgments in the case of quantifying in ascriptions, then such constraints must be built into the semantics of quantifying in ascriptions. Again here, I won’t concern myself with exactly how such a view would be implemented. The crucial point is that the quantifying in ascription in our dialogues will be understood as claiming that Henry does not believe the singular proposition concerning his ship that he will see it under any guise other than the one invoked by the name ‘Henry Grace à Dieu’ in the ascription ‘Henry believes he will see Henry Grace à Dieu’ that also occurs in that dialogue. In this way, the quantifying in

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<sup>31</sup> Marga Reimer [2004] defends a view on which names that are introduced with reference fixing descriptions (‘Neptune’; ‘Jack the Ripper’ etc.) have as their semantic contents that of the descriptions that fix their references at least until we become acquainted with the things that satisfy the descriptions *qua* things that satisfy the descriptions. It seems likely that on Reimer’s view ‘Henry Grace à Dieu’ has the semantics of a description until “acquaintance based uses” of the name take hold and so has such a semantics in the contexts we are considering.



ascription is consistent with the latter ascription, which requires for its truth that Henry believe the singular proposition concerning his ship that he will see it under the guise invoked by ‘Henry Grace à Dieu’ in that context. If we say that “negative” quantifying in ascriptions (‘There is *no* ship...’) in context may constrain under which guises the subject of the ascription may believe the relevant singular proposition in the sense of claiming only that the subject does not believe it under such-and-such guises, we should be prepared to say that “positive” quantifying in ascriptions (‘There is a ship...’) may require that the relevant singular proposition be believed under a certain guise or range of guises.<sup>32</sup> In particular, in a context like the ones we have been looking at where ‘Henry believes he will see Henry Grace à Dieu.’ is true but so is the “negative” quantifying in ascription, the corresponding “positive” quantifying in ascription (‘There is a ship such that...’) should minimally require for its truth in that context that Henry believe the singular proposition regarding his ship to the effect that he will see it under a guise other than that invoked by ‘Henry Grace à Dieu’ in that context. Since he doesn’t in the examples we have been considering (assuming this apparatus), we predict that the “positive” quantifying in ascription is false, as desired. Since RASTA enthusiasts have independent reason to invoke guises in the semantics of belief reports, the claim that they play a role in the semantics of quantifying in reports fits well with their overall view. It may be, then, that this is the approach to reconciling what initially appear to be conflicting *de re* ascriptions that best fits with RASTA.

This last way of dealing with the problem of apparently conflicting *de re* ascriptions has the effect of making “positive” quantifying in ascriptions stronger (at least

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<sup>32</sup> I say ‘may’ here because I want to leave open the possibility that in some contexts believing the relevant singular proposition under *any* guise will suffice for the truth of a “positive” quantifying in ascription.

in some contexts—see note 31). They now require the subject to have an attitude towards the relevant singular proposition *and* do so under some particular guise or range of guises. Will this change affect any of our earlier reasoning? Since the truth of a “positive” quantifying in ascription in context still requires the subject of the ascription to stand in the relation expressed by the attitude verb in that context to the relevant singular proposition, any argument in which we moved from the truth of the ascription in context to the claim that the subject of the ascription has an attitude towards a singular proposition and so a singular thought will still go through. In general, though, the falsity of a “positive” quantifying in ascription in context will not entail that the subject fails to bear the relation expressed by the attitude verb in that context to the relevant singular proposition, since it may merely entail that s/he doesn’t do so under some guise or range of guises. However, I never reasoned from the claim that a “positive” quantifying in ascription was false in a given context to the claim that the subject of the ascription failed to bear the relation expressed by the attitude verb in that context to the relevant singular proposition. I always reasoned from the claim that no *de re* ascription of a certain sort with a certain subject was true in a given context to the claim that the subject did not bear the relation expressed by the attitude verb in that context to the relevant singular proposition. There seems to me to be no reason to think that this way of arguing is affected by the strengthening of the truth conditions of “positive” quantifying in ascriptions.

Finally, what sort of picture of singular thought does RASTA give us? I would say that it is a very *pragmatic* picture. The interests of speakers and hearers, or QUD, in a context make it more or less useful to ascribe to a subject a thought directly about a

certain object. The reasons for this can be various. In the HD/MP case, in the context in which a *de re* ascription was true, and so HD's having a singular thought about MP was salient, speakers' and hearers' interests were focused on HD's accumulating information about the recent fire and who started it. HD determined that the fire was linked to other fires and other information about the person who started the fires (where he was at certain times, where he likes to start fires etc.). What links all this information is that it is all about the person who started the fire. Since it is very salient that HD is mulling over this information, it is useful to take his thoughts to be directly about MP. In the case of Henry, in a context in which a *de re* ascription was true, speakers and hearers are focused on his plan to see his new ship. Since he has enough information about it for his plan to succeed, it is useful to take his thoughts to be directly about the "object of his plan".

When it is useful in a context of conversation to take a subject's thoughts to be directly about an object *o*, the context determines relations expressed by attitude verbs in it such that the subject bears those relations to propositions that are singular with respect to *o*.<sup>33</sup> In extreme cases, the subject's cognitive connection to *o* may be quite remote, but the subject still succeeds in having singular thoughts about *o*. The Glenn case is such an extreme case, and such cases can be considered degenerate cases of singular thought. At the other end of the spectrum are paradigm cases of singular thought: cases in which a subject is perceiving an object in good perceptual conditions and having thoughts about it while perceiving it. In such cases, I have claimed that changing the context merely by shifting speakers' and hearers' interests cannot make the relevant *de re* ascriptions go false, as can happen in non-paradigmatic cases, as we have seen. The reason, to repeat, is

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<sup>33</sup> Or again, speakers' recognizable intentions track the relevant features of context and determine which relations attitude verbs express in those contexts. See notes 19 and 21.

that no matter what speaker and hearer interests are active in a context, and so no matter how stringent the relations expressed by attitude verbs in the context, the subject of the ascription will still bear those relations to the relevant singular propositions due to her very secure cognitive connection to the relevant object. Hence, paradigm cases of singular thought are the most directly about objects.

If we consider cases in which *de re* ascriptions are true in one context, so that the subject of the ascription has an attitude towards a singular proposition and hence a singular thought, but false in another, this means that though it served speaker and hearer interests in the first context to take the subject's thoughts to be directly about an object, it does not do so, or it serves speaker and hearer interests *not* to take the thoughts to be directly about the object, in the second context. In the first context, lax relations to singular propositions are expressed by attitude verbs; in the second context more stringent relations are expressed. Thus, in the second context, that the subject bears lax relations to a singular proposition is not of interest or it is of interest to ignore them. Consider again HD. In a context in which speakers and hearers are interested in HD possessing and accumulating evidence about the person who started the recent fire, that MP is the object that links the current evidence to other evidence HD possesses, and so allows him to combine it, is reason for taking his thoughts to be directly about MP and so attitude verbs express sufficiently lax relations in that context. When speakers and hearers are interested in the question of whether HD can make an arrest, that HD bears lax relations to singular propositions about MP is of no interest. Hence, verbs of attitude express more stringent relations such that HD only stands in the relation expressed by

‘suspects’ to the proposition that MP started the fire if HD has enough information to arrest him, which he does not.

Let me close my discussion of RASTA by briefly mentioning an interesting and somewhat different version of it suggested to me by Rachel Goodman.<sup>34</sup> I began by saying that according to RASTA (really RAST), having a singular thought *just is* having a thought whose content is a singular proposition. Assuming RASTA, if a *de re* attitude ascription is true in a context, the subject of the ascription must bear the relation expressed by the attitude verb in that context to a singular proposition. According to RASTA, having an attitude towards a singular proposition *just is* having a thought with a singular proposition as its content and hence having a singular thought. Goodman suggested altering RASTA by giving up the claim that *in general* in bearing the relation expressed by an attitude verb in context to a singular proposition, one has a thought whose content is a singular proposition and hence a singular thought. Especially in the case of contexts in which attitude verbs express extremely lax relations, her idea is that you could bear such a relation to a singular proposition without having a thought whose *content* really is a singular proposition and so without having a singular thought. Of course in embracing this idea, we give up one advantage of the version of RASTA I have been discussing: on the version of RASTA I have endorsed to this point, the truth of *de re* attitude ascriptions is our guide to the presence of singular thought. Thereby we not only have a reliable way of detecting singular thought, but the notion of singular thought is systematically reflected in our talk about each other’s thoughts as we would expect it to be if it is a distinctive and significant phenomenon. So if we give up the idea that truth of

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<sup>34</sup>Personal communication. Thanks to Rachel Goodman for the helpful comments. I am certain what I am about to say is in the *spirit* of Goodman’s suggestion, but I can’t be sure that she would approve of all details.

*de re* belief ascriptions is our guide to the presence of singular thought as Goodman suggests, we would have to come up with a different principled way of determining when singular thought is present (i.e. when a thought *really does* have as its content a singular proposition).

Perhaps a phenomenon noted earlier would help.<sup>35</sup> I noted that in cases in of what I called *paradigmatic singular thought*—cases in which I am visually perceiving an object and occurrently having thoughts directed at the perceived object—we can’t get all relevant *de re* ascriptions to go false by changing the context without changing the cognitive situation of the subject of the ascription in the way we can e.g. with cases in which *de re* ascriptions are true in a context even though the subject of the ascription is not acquainted with the relevant object. Instead of saying as I did earlier that these were *paradigmatic* cases of singular thought and that they were the *most directly* about objects, perhaps, roughly following Goodman’s suggested version of RASTA, we should say that only in these cases do we really have singular thoughts at all: thoughts whose contents are singular propositions. In other cases in which we only bear more lax relations expressed by attitude verbs in context to singular propositions, the contents of our thoughts are not singular propositions. Our relations to singular propositions in these latter cases are less direct and more mediated than in cases of (what we are now calling) real singular thought where *the thought itself* has a singular proposition as its content. On such a way of construing RASTA, as Goodman pointed out, it appears *not* to entail that there is acquaintanceless singular thought. I leave open this version of RASTA as an interesting alternative to what was presented above, though my subsequent references to RASTA will be to the version presented and developed in the bulk of this section.

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<sup>35</sup> This I think is *not* part of what Goodman suggested.

## 2. Mental Files

Recently, a number of philosophers have proposed that we understand singular thought in terms of *mental files*. Because there are significant differences between how various philosophers think of mental files and what they take the connection between mental files and singular thought to be, I am not sure whether I am hostile to mental files *per se*. I am however, skeptical about recent attempts to explicate the notion of *singular thought* by means of them.<sup>36</sup> As such, I'll discuss two recent accounts of singular thought in terms of mental files.

Robin Jeshion [2010b] holds that agents have mental files that bind together information the agent takes to be about a single individual. An agent's system of files constitutes her perspective on what objects there are in the world (so far as she knows) and what properties they have. Because this system of files constitutes the agent's view about how objects are individuated (one for each file), the agent updates, merges, separates and initiates these files in characteristic ways. When the agent receives new information about an object she has a file for, she updates the file with the new information. If an agent comes to identify two objects she had taken to be distinct, she merges the files for the objects, and so on. Jeshion claims that files are labeled with mental names and demonstratives. What is distinctive about Jeshion's view is the relation between mental files and singular thought. Jeshion holds that "We think singular thoughts about an individual if and only if we think of them through a mental file."<sup>37</sup> Jeshion claims that this is not definitional of mental files, but is rather a "theoretical conjecture" on the relation between mental files and singular thought. Nonetheless,

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<sup>36</sup> See Dorr [2011] p. 953-54 for an expression of similar skepticism.

<sup>37</sup> Jeshion [2010b] p. 130.

Jeshion thinks the relation between mental files and singular thinking is awfully tight. She writes: ‘*Thinking about an individual from a file is constitutive of singular thinking about that individual.*’<sup>38</sup>

Jeshion attempts to defend this claim by appealing to recent work on object perception.<sup>39</sup> She cites work on *early vision*—a stage in visual processing that allegedly involves no admixture of the perceiving subject’s beliefs. At this stage of visual processing the primary task is to attend to, select and track objects. The objects are purportedly tracked without necessarily encoding information about their properties or location. Jeshion says that the objects are tracked *deictically*. She cites work of Pylyshyn in which he posits the existence of fingers of instantiation (FINST’s) to explain this deictic tracking of objects. Jeshion asks us to think of them as “visual virtual fingers” that point at objects in the current visual field. FINST’s are alleged to be a non-conceptual means of referencing objects, since they do not represent the object as satisfying some description. A particular FINST gets bound to an object in the visual field and endows the object with the status of being the same object even as it alters its properties and location. FINST’s allegedly get associated with *object files* that store temporary representations of objects in a recent visual field and are updated with information about a present visual field. The associated FINST determines which object an object file is about, and not the information in the object file. So as an object a FINST “is pointing at” in our current visual field changes and moves, we add that information to the object file the FINST is associated with. Since FINST’s are “by their nature” non-conceptual reference devices, thinking about an object via its object file, which the

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<sup>38</sup> Jeshion [2010b] p. 132; her emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> Jeshion [2010b] pp. 132-35



associated FINST connects to the object, is non-conceptual and so singular. It will be important to note for later that object files are not mental files according to Jeshion, since “Mental files’ essential singularity is parasitic on both objects files’ essential singularity and our use of mental names, demonstratives, and indexicals.”<sup>40</sup> If the “essential singularity” of mental files is in part parasitic on the “essential singularity” of objects files, and the latter in part explains the former for Jeshion, then object files cannot be mental files.

Jeshion thinks that the singularity of thinking about an object through an object file via its FINST is the key to thinking about an individual from a mental file being constitutive of singular thinking about that individual. Let me quote the crucial passage in which Jeshion explains how this is so:

Here’s a natural way to construe the essential singularity of thought from mental files: Thinking of an individual from a mental file just is thinking of an individual with a mental name or demonstrative. And, because thought with mental names and demonstratives is ontogenetically rooted in the coupling of them with FINSTs, thinking of an individual with a mental name or demonstrative is essentially singular.

FINSTs can, and typically do, go solo in their non-conceptual referencing in the sense that they do not need an accompanying mental demonstrative partner—a mental “that,” “she,” or “it”—in order to track a single object. But FINSTs can be accompanied by a mental demonstrative, with the mental demonstrative referring to the object that the FINST refers to. Arguably, such use of mental demonstratives is necessary for thought (though not tracking) of individuals. Through their use in communication and associated mental processes, mental demonstratives, construed as a type, come to function as mental stand-ins for FINSTs. They develop so as to function constitutively as abstract singular referring devices by means of which we think singularly about individuals. By virtue of this general constitutive function, mental demonstratives can serve as devices of singular thought even in the absence of any perceptual indexing of the object. So long as the thinker has a means of identifying the object—and in the absence of perceptual indexing, descriptive identification serves—mental demonstratives

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<sup>40</sup>Jeshion [2010b] p. 134.

function cognitively to afford singular thought about individuals.<sup>41</sup>

Thinking of an individual from a mental file, Jeshion claims here, *just is* thinking of that individual with a mental name or demonstrative (presumably one that labels that file).

Now though FINST's need not be accompanied by mental demonstratives or names, they can be and when they are the name or demonstrative refers to what the FINST does.

Jeshion speculates that thought with mental names and demonstratives is “ontogenetically rooted in the coupling of them with FINST's”. Because of this coupling and other uses of mental demonstratives (Jeshion drops out talk of mental names at this point), they come to function as “mental stand-ins” for FINST's. In so doing, they come to function “constitutively” as singular referring devices by means of which we engage in singular thought. Having developed this constitutive function, mental demonstratives can serve as vehicles of singular thought even absent any association with FINST's or visual presentation of the relevant object. So long as a thinker can identify an object—even descriptively—she can singularly think about it via a mental demonstrative. It is for this reason that Jeshion rejects any acquaintance condition on singular thought.

Having rejected any *acquaintance* condition on singular thought, Jeshion nonetheless thinks there *is* another sort of condition on singular thought. She calls it the 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 and motivations. Jeshion makes clear that the significance in question is determined from the agent's perspective, so that things that are in some sense significant, may not be significant *to me* so that I have no mental files for them. Further, an agent's *judgment*

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<sup>41</sup> Jeshion [2010b] p. 135

that something is significant is neither necessary nor sufficient for yielding the significance required for initiating a mental file for, and so having a singular thought about, the thing. It is being disposed to respond to the individual in certain ways—by it being involved in one’s plans, projects, affective states and so on—that makes an individual significant for an agent in a way that initiates the agent’s mental file for that individual, and so allows her to have singular thoughts about it. Indeed, Jeshion holds that the initiation of a mental file is not something the agent is in control of. It is one’s cognitive system that is control of mental file initiation. Apparently, the idea is that once I am disposed to respond to an object in certain ways—it is involved in my plans, projects, affective states and so on—my cognitive system takes over and initiates a mental file for it. Finally, it should be clear that an object can satisfy Jeshion’s Significance Condition for me even though I am not acquainted with it (one of her examples is how the Unabomber satisfied the condition for her prior to anyone “knowing who he was”). Hence the possibility of acquaintanceless singular thought on Jeshion’s view.

Turning now to critical remarks, I’ll start the statement of my first concern by noting that Jeshion agrees with my claim above that the paradigm case of singular thought is thinking about an object that one is directly perceiving.<sup>42</sup> But in considering those cases, we were interested in the conditions under which we have thoughts that are in some sense directly about objects. The question we were addressing—the question of what singular thought is—seemed to be a question about the conditions under which our thoughts are connected in a particularly direct way to objects. But Jeshion appears to be addressing a completely different question: she appears to be addressing a question about

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<sup>42</sup> Jeshion [2010b] calls such cases “the most basic cases of singular thought.” p. 130

the *internal structure* of our thinking. She writes ‘Cognition creates mental files [for things with which we are unacquainted] such that they share a common structure with the object files we create in the most basic cases of singular thought with direct perceptual acquaintance.’<sup>43</sup> So here singular thought about objects we are not acquainted with counts as singular not because of any characteristic direct connection between the thought and the object, but rather because my internal thinking with mental files in such cases is structurally like my thinking about objects when I am perceiving them. But this seems to me to be changing the subject. To repeat, we began with paradigm cases of singular thought—perceiving an object and thinking about it qua object I am perceiving—and asked how we had to be related to an object in order to have something like that kind of direct thought about it. Instead of answering that question, Jeshion tells us a story about the conditions under which the internal structure of our thoughts is a certain way. But now any sort of direct connection to an object in thought drops out of the picture completely. This is perhaps made most clear by the fact that on Jeshion’s view, Leverrier had singular thoughts about the non-existent planet Vulcan. Clearly, this has to be a claim about the internal structure of Leverrier’s Vulcan thoughts and not about how his thoughts are directly connected to some object. So my first complaint is that Jeshion’s account of singular thought seems to amount to answering a different question from the one we were asking when we asked under what conditions one can have thoughts that are particularly, directly about objects. I am not suggesting that the question Jeshion is addressing might not be interesting, but it does seem to be a different question.

My second concern is with Jeshion’s account as to why thinking with mental files is constitutive of singular thought given in the passage I quoted above. I just don’t

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<sup>43</sup> Jeshion [2010b] p. 130

understand the account. (The reader may wish to consult the quoted passage above in conjunction with the coming exposition of it.) The first claim is that thinking with or from a mental file is just thinking with a mental name or demonstrative. The next claim is that because thinking with mental names or demonstratives is “ontogenetically” or developmentally rooted in coupling them with FINST’s, thinking with the former is essentially singular. I take it this means that the fact that mental names or demonstratives are coupled with FINST’s is part of the explanation for how the former develop into constitutively singular referring devices. The first part of that explanation, I take it, is that when a mental name or demonstrative accompanies a FINST, the FINST determines the referent of the mental name or demonstrative. Since the FINST “by its nature” is a non-conceptual referring device and since it is determining the referent of the accompanying mental name or demonstrative, the latter is also a constitutively non-conceptual referring device. So in such cases, thinking of the object by means of the FINST/mental-name-or-demonstrative pair is singular thought. To this point I more or less follow the explanation, though I’d like to hear about the empirical evidence for it. But the next part I just don’t follow. Jeshion says that because of the way mental demonstratives are used in “communication and associated mental processes” they come to function as mental stand-ins for FINSTs and develop so as to function “constitutively” as singular referring devices by means of which we think singular thoughts. My two problems here are, first, we haven’t been told what ways mental demonstratives are used in communication and thought and why being used in those ways results in their becoming mental stand-ins for FINST’s. Second, and more importantly, what does it mean to be a mental stand-in for a FINST and why does this result in mental

demonstratives being constitutively singular referring devices? FINSTs are supposed to be like fingers in my visual field pointing at elements in my visual field. If I were convinced that there are such things, I can see why I might think of them as constitutively non-conceptual, and hence singular, referring devices. But what would be a mental stand-in for such a thing in thought? What is the analogue or stand-in in thought of a FINST pointing at and hence referring to something in my visual field in such a way that I would find it convincing to think that the analogue in thought is a constitutively non-conceptual, and hence singular, device for referring? This is particularly puzzling in light of the fact that Jeshion allows, as she must for her purposes, that the way the thinker identifies the object referred to may be descriptive. How is fixing the referent of a mental demonstrative via description consistent with its being a mental stand-in for a FINST, whose referent is fixed by a kind of pointing in my visual field? In short, I can't see how mental demonstratives in thought whose referents are fixed by description function in anything like the way FINSTs are alleged to function ("visual virtual fingers") such that it would be compelling that they are constitutively non-conceptual, singular referring devices on the model of FINSTs (and hence mental stand-ins for FINSTs).

My third concern is that, even waiving the previous worry, Jeshion's story about how/why thinking with mental files is constitutively singular thought appears highly speculative, overly specific and a bit idiosyncratic. In some sense, I am sympathetic to Jeshion's attempt to ground the story empirically. But to do so by committing to the theory of FINST's, along with the claim that the semantic functioning of mental names and demonstratives is ontogenetically rooted in being coupled with FINST's, and the claim that mental demonstratives can serve as mental stand-ins for FINST's, is to anchor

the story about thinking with mental files being constitutively singular in a very specific and highly speculative story in cognitive science. I'd be worried about how this will all look in twenty or so years. I'd also want to hear more about the empirical evidence for the crucial claims that the semantic functioning of mental names and demonstratives is ontogenetically rooted in coupling them with FINST's, as I mentioned above, and the claim that they come to function as mental stand-ins for FINST's.

My fourth concern has to do with Jeshion's Significance Condition and the claim that one has a singular thought about an individual iff one thinks about it through a mental file. Together, these claims entail that if an individual is not significant to an agent, she has no singular thought about it. But that just seems false. Consider a case where Jeshion thinks this delivers the right result.<sup>44</sup> I am walking along Ocean Avenue with a friend and pass a car with a parking ticket. I have no interest in the car, the ticket etc. I point at the car and say 'She is going to be angry.' intending to say something about the car's owner. We chuckle, walk on and don't give the ticket or the car another thought. Jeshion thinks that here my thought was not singular. The lack of significance of the car owner to me explains why I have no mental file for her and so why I have no singular thought about her. I'm not sure whether I agree that I have no singular thought in this case, but change it in the following way. As I am about to make my utterance, the car owner appears keys in hand and begins to open the door of the car without yet spotting the ticket. I see her, point at her and utter as before 'She is going to be angry.' We chuckle, walk on and don't give the car, the ticket or the owner a further thought. Here again, the car owner is not significant to me. She is no more involved in my plans, affective states and so on than she was in the first scenario. But then there should be no

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<sup>44</sup> Jeshion [2010b] p. 115

mental file for her and I will not have had a singular thought about her. To me at least, that just seems straight up wrong. Indeed, this seems to me a paradigm case of singular thought.

We seem to get the same wrong results in other cases of paradigmatic singular thought. I am walking down the beach and I happen to see a large seagull. I have no interest in seagulls at all, but it does strike me how large it is. I walk on never to give the gull another thought. Again, the gull is not significant in Jeshion's sense and so again on her view I cannot have a singular thought about it. Again, this seems incorrect.

For these last two cases, perhaps Jeshion would want to bring in FINST's and their associated object files to explain the having of singular thought. As we have seen, she does sometimes talk about thinking singularly about an object through its object file and associated FINST.<sup>45</sup> But this brings up a number of problems. First, given that object files are not mental files (as we noted earlier), how can the claim that thinking of an object through an object file is singular thinking about it be squared with Jeshion's claim that thinking of an object via a mental file is *constitutive* of singular thinking? If Jeshion wants to claim that in these last two cases the singular thinking involves FINST's and object files instead of mental files/demonstratives, she would have to give up the claim that thinking about an individual through a mental file is constitutive of singular thought. Second, she also would have to give up the Significance Condition as a general condition on singular thought (since here agents can have singular thoughts about individuals without the individuals being significant to the agent). But giving up all of this is to give up the core of her account of singular thought. Further she would be giving a *different account* of paradigm cases of singular thought without significance than she

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<sup>45</sup> Jeshion [2010b] p. 134



gives of other cases of singular thought (the latter constitutively involve thinking of an individual through a mental file and are governed by the Significance Condition; the former are not). But this is to have a disjunctive theory of singular thought. That doesn't look very attractive.

My final concern has to do with Jeshion's methodology. Jeshion relies on the method of describing various cases and then asking whether we have the intuition in this or that case that there is singular thought. She then tries to tailor the theory of singular thought to fit the intuitions about cases. To be sure, Jeshion stresses that such intuitions are not sacrosanct and may be overturned by theory. Still, the primary motivation Jeshion provides for her theory is that it gets her intuitions about her various cases right (her set 1-3 cases).<sup>46</sup> That the only starting point and main motivation we have in constructing a theory of singular thought is intuitions about its presence or absence in hypothetical cases is to me quite worrying. Given that singular thought is an abstract and theoretical notion, it isn't at all clear to me what pretheoretical intuitions about cases are tracking. Further, it seems to me unlikely there will be significant agreement on intuitions about the cases that are important to Jeshion's methodology. I'll say more about this later. But it is perhaps worth adding that to the extent that I have them, my own intuitions about Jeshion's cases diverge significantly from hers in ways that matter.<sup>47</sup> So I worry about the methodology Jeshion adopts here. This contrasts with RASTA, where there are robust linguistic diagnostics for the presence of singular thought: the truth of *de re* ascriptions. That Jeshion does not appeal to such linguistic diagnostics

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<sup>46</sup> Jeshion [2010b] p. 118

<sup>47</sup> Specifically, Jeshion [2010b] thinks that our intuitions about the case she calls Footprints (p. 115-16) and the case she calls Bearprint (p. 117) diverge significantly and that her Significance Condition explains this. I can only report that my intuitions about these cases do not diverge (I am not sure whether I intuit the presence of singular thought in the two cases or not—but I do have the same iffy intuitions about both).

makes me wonder whether she thinks that our attitude ascriptions fail to in any way systematically reflect the presence and absence of singular thought. According to RASTA, of course, they do. But if Jeshion's view is that they don't, I would say about her view what I said earlier: if I had a theory of singular thought on which its presence or absence is not reflected in the way we talk about each other's thoughts, I would conclude that there is no such distinctive and significant phenomenon.

Like Jeshion, Francois Recanati [2010, 2012] thinks that an account of mental files is what is required to shed light on the notion of singular thought. Setting aside important qualifications I'll discuss later, Recanati thinks that acquaintance is required for singular thought. According to Recanati, we are acquainted with objects when we bear relations to them that allow us to gain information about them. These acquaintance relations Recanati calls *epistemically rewarding (ER) relations*. Mental files are based on these relations in the sense that it is the function of a file to store information about an object that we bear acquaintance relations to, which information is obtained in virtue of standing in that relation to the object. As examples of ER relations, Recanati mentions perceptual acquaintance; "mediated acquaintance" by way of being part of a communicative chain; and contextual relations to objects that are utilized in indexical reference (e.g. occupying a location).<sup>48</sup> What determines the referent of a file is which object is the relata of the acquaintance relations the file is based on.<sup>49</sup> The information in a file plays no role in determining the referent and may not even be satisfied by the

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<sup>48</sup> Recanati [2012] pp. 35-6

<sup>49</sup> There are various different types of files. Some are based on only one ER relation and contain only information yielded by that relation. Some are based on only one ER relation but contain information not yielded by that relation. Some are based on more than one ER relation. Recanati [2012] pp. 64-66; 74. Files also differ in how long they exist: in their *stability*. See pp. 61-63; 71-75.

referent.<sup>50</sup> Files are typed according to which ER relation they are based on and it is a *normative* requirement that a file of a given type should only be tokened given that the subject stands in the relevant ER relation to an object (the referent of the file). In the case of “malfunction” a file can be tokened when the relevant ER relation fails to obtain. As we’ll see, this will be important when we turn to consider Recanati’s views on acquaintanceless singular thought.

According to Recanati, to have a singular thought about an object *o* is to think a thought about *o* via a non-descriptional mode of presentation. Mental files are non-descriptional modes of presentation. They are non-descriptional modes of presentation precisely because their referents are determined *relationally* (i.e. their referents are the relata of the ER relations on which they are based) rather than *satisfactionally* (i.e. by satisfying the information in the file).<sup>51</sup> Hence, for Recanati, to have a singular thought about *o* is to think a thought content about *o* (in part) by means of a mental file whose referent is *o*. It is important for Recanati that it is the file itself, and not the information it contains, that is the mode of presentation of the object.

Not only does Recanati claim that we think a singular thought by tokening a mental file, and that it is the function of a mental file to store information about an object one is acquainted with, but he appears to claim that these are *conceptual truths*. Consider the following paragraph, which begins a section of his [2010] and so the argument here presumably doesn’t presuppose other claims:

We think singular thoughts about individuals by tokening singular vehicles in thought (mental files, or equivalently: mental singular terms). I have argued that such files, qua types, are best characterized by their function: to store information gained in virtue of acquaintance relations to

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<sup>50</sup> Recanati [2012] pp. 37-8.

<sup>51</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 57

the reference of the file. *If this is right, acquaintance is involved in the very concept of a singular thought.*<sup>52</sup>

The only way I can see for Recanati to get to the conclusion stated in the final italicized sentence on the basis of what comes before is to hold that the claim that we think singular thoughts by tokening mental files and the claim that that the function of mental files is to store information gained by acquaintance relations to the referents of the files are both conceptual truths. The idea would then be that the concept of a singular thought involves the concept of a mental file (by the former conceptual truth) and the concept of a mental file involves the concept of acquaintance (by the latter conceptual truth). Hence, by the principle that if the concept of A involves the concept of B and the concept of B involves the concept of C, the concept of A involves the concept of C, Recanati can then conclude that the concept of a singular thought involves the concept of acquaintance. I'll return to these points below in my critical remarks.

Now as Recanati himself points out, it appears his theory of singular thought will not allow acquaintanceless singular thought. For Recanati is committed to the following two principles:

1. One cannot have a singular thought about a without possessing and using a mental file whose referent is a.
2. To possess and use a mental file whose referent is a one must be acquainted with a.

Together, these principles certainly seem to entail that one cannot have a singular thought about a without being acquainted with a. But Recanati argues that they do not. Principle 2, Recanati claims, is a *normative* principle. Recall that this was mentioned earlier. This normative principle, Recanati claims, follows from the function of a mental file. Since the function of a mental file is to store information about an object one stands in an ER

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<sup>52</sup> Recanati [2010] p. 181 my emphasis. An exactly similar passage occurs in Recanati [2012] p. 165.

relation to, the primary reason to open a file is that one is *in* an ER relation to an object, and thereby is obtaining information from it that needs storage. Hence one opens a mental file for it. However, nothing precludes one opening a mental file for an object that one as yet is not acquainted with and knows only by description. If in addition one anticipates becoming acquainted with the object, one even has a reason for doing so. One may want to store information about the object one knows by description and anticipates being acquainted with, thereby having a file in which to store further information about the object obtained in the future in virtue of standing in an ER relation to the object.

Recanati writes:

...the user who knows the referent only by description nevertheless *opens a file for it* because he anticipates that he will soon be acquainted with it and needs a place to store information about it. On that interpretation, a file may be opened *before* the epistemic requirement [condition 2 above] is met. The epistemic requirement still holds, however. The only *reason* to open a file in such cases is that the user expects to stand in the appropriate relation to the referent. So *a mental file still requires, for its justification, that the subject stand in a suitable, information-bearing relation to the referent.*<sup>53</sup>

This is not yet to say that when a subject opens a mental file for an object she isn't acquainted with but knows only by description she *succeeds* in thinking a singular thought about it. For Recanati holds that I can token a mental file for an object I know only by description, anticipating becoming acquainted with it, but fail to think a singular thought. In such a case, though there is a singular thought *vehicle* involving the mental file I have tokened, I nonetheless have not succeeded in thinking a singular thought *content* and so do not have a singular thought.<sup>54</sup> Recanati thinks that when Leverrier had named the planet he hoped to discover 'Vulcan', where there turned out to be no such

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<sup>53</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 158; his emphasis.

<sup>54</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 160, 164, 169, 171

planet, Leverrier had Vulcan thoughts, and he was precisely tokening a singular thought vehicle involving the mental file for Vulcan, but was not having singular thought *contents*. This means that on Recanati's view, tokening a mental file is not sufficient for having singular thought. The crucial question is: will Recanati allow that one *can* have singular thoughts about objects for which one has mental files but are known only by description? He tentatively answers 'yes'. In such a case, what conditions must be satisfied for there to be singular thought? One can think a singular thought about an object o known only by description, say 'the F', just in case the following conditions are met:

- a. One has formed a mental file for the F
- b. One formed this file in anticipation of becoming acquainted with the F.
- c. One is right in one's anticipation that one will become acquainted with the F.<sup>55</sup>

So under these conditions, Recanati allows that one can have acquaintanceless singular thought.

One final expositional note on Recanati. In comparing his account of the conditions under which one has reason to open a mental file (primarily, that we are or expect to be acquainted with the referent, which will enable us to obtain information about it that we will store in the file—call this Recanati's expected acquaintance condition) to Jeshion's Significance Condition on initiating mental files, Recanati claims that her Significance Condition cannot be met without his expected acquaintance condition being satisfied. But that is clearly incorrect. Consider Jeshion's Bearprint example in which she claims her Significance Condition is met and so a mental file is initiated and singular thought is had:

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<sup>55</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 164-5; 169

I go off camping in the Sierras with my family. We set up our tent, hoist our food in a tree. My son looks anxious and I assure him that there probably aren't any bears in the area, that we're just taking precautions. After setting up, we head for the stream for a pre-dinner dip. The mud on the banks reveals what I recognize to be a grown male bear's footprints. Later, after washing up the dishes from dinner, my husband notices what he recognizes to be fresh bear scat. Knowing what we know about bears- especially that they are solitary and territorial- we automatically start debating about whether we should go AWOL. I say: I think we should get off his turf.<sup>56</sup>

In this case, the bear has taken on a significance to the members of Jeshion's family and is affecting their emotions, plans, etc. So Jeshion's Significance Condition does appear to be satisfied as she claims. However, it seems equally clear that Recanati's expected acquaintance condition need not be satisfied at all. Far from anticipating becoming acquainted with the bear, the family may hope and justifiably believe that they *never* become acquainted with the bear and take steps to insure that they don't. Given how solitary bears are, which they know, they are very likely right. So it is easy to come up with cases in which Jeshion's condition is met and Recanati's is not, contrary to what he claims.

Let me now turn to critical remarks. My first worry is similar to a concern I had with Jeshion's approach and regards methodology. Recall that according to RASTA, the truth of *de re* ascriptions requires the subject to have an attitude towards a singular proposition and hence have a singular thought. Hawthorne and Manley's [2012] principles HARMONY and SUFFICIENCY entail this as well. Recanati explicitly rejects HARMONY, the claim that the truth of *de re* ascriptions requires the subject to believe a singular proposition (though Recanati misstates HARMONY as the claim that the truth of a *de re* ascription requires the subject to have a singular *thought*). As such,

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<sup>56</sup> Jeshion [2010b] p. 117.

for Recanati the truth of a *de re* ascription is not a diagnostic for the having of singular thought. Indeed, Recanati appears to deny that there are *any* such linguistic diagnostics for singular thought on his view.<sup>57</sup> As I noted in discussing Jeshion, the idea that there is a distinctive and significant notion of singular thought, but that its presence or absence is not systematically reflected in our talk about each other's thoughts strikes me as very implausible. At any rate, Recanati quotes Hawthorne and Manley's (in an earlier version of [2012]) challenge to acquaintance theorists who reject HARMONY as follows: such theorists 'face the challenge of explicating the relevant notion of singular thought while allowing it to float free of the semantics of belief reports.'<sup>58</sup> Recanati responds by saying that his theory of mental files is precisely intended to explicate the notion of singular thought. But this misunderstands the objection. How can you tell whether your theory is explicating the relevant notion of singular thought if you have no independent means of detecting its presence (e.g. by linguistic diagnostics)? I suppose you could just say that by 'singular thought' you just mean what your theory says it is. But why think *that* notion of singular thought is of any theoretical interest? I think the only thing Recanati can say here is that we have to rely on our intuitions about cases to decide whether singular thought is present or not and tailor theory to respect intuitions. I've already expressed my skepticism about this methodology in discussing Jeshion. I'll just add here that I would think practitioners of this methodology like Recanati and Jeshion would be worried by the fact that their own intuitions about crucial cases often conflict.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 154

<sup>58</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 153

<sup>59</sup> E.g. they disagree about whether singular thought is present in the Leverrier/Vulcan case, and Jeshion's [2010] Bearprint, Adoption and God cases, to name just a few.



My second concern regards Recanati's commitment, discussed earlier, to the claim that both of the following are conceptual truths: 1. we think singular thoughts by tokening mental files; and 2. the function of mental files is to store information gained by acquaintance relations to the referents of the files. Taking the second claim first, many who write on mental files would deny the claim that the function of mental files is to store information gained via acquaintance relations. Indeed, presumably Jeshion would since it seems that on her account the function of mental files is to store information about objects that are *significant* (in her technical sense) to a subject. And as we saw, the objects that are significant to a subject in Jeshion's sense need not be things that he is, anticipates being or will be acquainted with. What will Recanati say about such theorists? I suspect he has to say either that they just don't have the concept of a mental file, or at least not his concept of a mental file, or that they are confused about the concept. It seems quite implausible that any theorist who disagrees with Recanati on this score doesn't have the concept of a mental file or is conceptually confused. I suppose Recanati could simply insist that *his* concept of a mental file *is* such that its function is to store information gained by acquaintance relations. But now this makes the first alleged conceptual truth dubious. For Recanati must now claim that the concept of a singular thought involves *his* concept of a mental file. So again, other theorists who either reject the claim that we think singular thoughts by tokening mental files or who agree with this but reject Recanati's concept of a mental file either lack the concept of singular thought, or at least Recanati's concept of singular thought, or are conceptually confused. Again, none of these options seems plausible. I very much doubt Recanati wants to be taken as writing works about his own idiosyncratic notion of singular thought. And the claim that

theorists who disagree with him on the claim that we think singular thoughts by tokening mental files either lack the concept of singular thought altogether or are conceptually confused seems an overstatement.

My third concern is that Recanati's theory makes odd predictions. I've several times now expressed skepticism about relying solely on intuitions about whether singular thought is present or not in various cases in constructing and evaluating theories of singular thought, but I think that I can still show that Recanati's theory will make odd, counterintuitive predictions in lots of cases. Specifically, it will predict that singular thought is present in one case and not in another, where it does not seem as though the cases should diverge in this respect (i.e. it seems that singular thought should be present in both or neither). I put a bit more stock in such comparative judgments than I do in straight judgments about whether singular thought is present in a single case, because I think the former are more robust than the latter. Often, I will have the intuition that two cases should either both count as the having of a singular thought or both not count. But I am unsure which it is (see note 47).

First, consider a case Recanati mentions himself that he attributes to Cian Dorr. Leverrier opened a mental file for Neptune when it was only known to him by description. The above conditions on acquaintanceless singular thought are met and so Recanati's view predicts that Leverrier had singular thoughts about Neptune prior to being acquainted with it. But now suppose that Leverrier had behaved in exactly the way he actually did, but was tragically killed in a freak accident after opening the Neptune mental file and before becoming acquainted with Neptune. It looks like condition c on singular thought above is not met and so Leverrier did not have acquaintanceless singular

thought about Neptune in this case. But it seems very strange indeed that prior to becoming acquainted with Neptune, Leverrier (we can suppose) tokened the very same thought vehicles involving his Neptune mental file in both cases, had the very same information about Neptune in both cases, but in one case he had singular thoughts and in the other case he didn't due to a *future* freak accident in the latter case. Recanati suggests that maybe we should say that condition c *was* met in the case in which Leverrier was tragically killed, because had he lived he would have become acquainted with Neptune. But such a move would require a counterfactual reformulation of condition c above (or, equivalently, an explication of what it is to be *right in one's anticipation of something*, when that thing fails to occur) and it is completely unobvious how it would go. After all, in virtually any case in which one opens a mental file expecting to be acquainted with an object one singles out descriptively but fails to become acquainted, there will be a possible world in which one *does* become acquainted with the object satisfying the description. Presumably, this is even true of the Leverrier/Vulcan case, since there might have been a planet perturbing Mercury's orbit. So formulating a counterfactual version of condition c that delivers just the results Recanati wants will be far from trivial, especially once we start bringing in so-called finks and masks.

Here is another similar worry for condition c as it stands. Suppose you and I are both scientists who work together. We are very convinced that there is a unique as yet undiscovered thing that will explain the total mass of the universe. We give it the name 'dark matter' and open mental files for it. You are very optimistic that we will become acquainted with it and anticipate doing so. I am completely skeptical that we will ever become acquainted with it, and so do not anticipate doing so. I don't let on to you in part

because I don't think it matters since I think we will likely make some sort of important discoveries in trying to find dark matter. As a result of an extremely unlikely series of events, we in fact become acquainted with dark matter (i.e. I was right to be skeptical but we got very, very lucky over and over). It appears that you had singular thoughts about dark matter but I did not prior to becoming acquainted with it on Recanati's view, since you satisfy all of a-c above, but I don't satisfy b. Again, this seems very strange: my justified pessimism prevented me from having singular thoughts, whereas your unjustified, cheery optimism allowed you to have them.

Examples could be multiplied indefinitely, but I'll consider one more. Suppose that as a result of complicated calculations, we discover that there is a very unusual object off in interstellar space at a location our calculations allowed us to precisely determine. Our calculations tell us very little about the object except its location and that it defies what we take to be a bunch of laws of physics. We decide to send a manned mission to find this object and see what it is, knowing that it will take multiple generations to get there. The object is dubbed 'Mysto' as the first generation leaves and opens Mysto mental files. There is frequent talk and thought about Mysto for several generations of space travelers. None anticipate becoming acquainted with Mysto since they know they will be long dead before they arrive at Mysto's location. When the fourth generation of traveler's is born, they are raised being told that they will become acquainted with Mysto. Older generations know that they will die before arriving and so do not anticipate becoming acquainted with Mysto. Fourth generation travelers and younger correctly anticipate being acquainted with Mysto, fifth generation travelers and older do not. In the thinking and talking prior to the fourth generation and younger becoming acquainted with

Mysto, the fourth generation and younger have singular thoughts about Mysto on Recanati's view (they satisfy conditions a-c above), while the fifth generation and older do not despite the fact that there may be no psychological difference between them at all. Again, this seems extremely counterintuitive.

My final worry with Recanati's view concerns how the references of mental files in the absence of acquaintance are determined and the consequences of this for his view of singular thought. On the Singularist view Recanati claims to be defending, there are two ways one can think about objects: directly or descriptively (as the thing possessing such-and-such properties).<sup>60</sup> Recanati rails about Russell mistakenly rejecting Frege's sense/reference distinction because he thought it was incompatible with direct thinking about objects—singular thought. The key to reconciling the Fregean sense/reference distinction with singular thought, Recanati tells us, is recognizing the existence of *non-descriptive senses/modes of presentation*. And Recanati claims that non-descriptive modes of presentation just are his mental files.<sup>61</sup> But what is it about mental files that makes them *non-descriptive* modes of presentation? What *constitutes* their being non-descriptive? Recanati is clear that it is the fact, discussed earlier, that the referent of a mental file is determined by the acquaintance relation(s) the file is based on. Specifically, the object that the subject is related to by the acquaintance relation the file is based on is the referent of the file; and this is what it is for the file to be a *non-descriptive* mode of presentation:

On the mental file picture, what distinguishes descriptive from non-descriptive senses is the mechanism of reference determination. To use

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<sup>60</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 4, 13, 57

<sup>61</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 34

Kent Bach's terminology, reference determination is 'satisfactional' in the descriptive case, and 'relational' in the non-descriptive or *de re* case...'<sup>62</sup>

As we discussed earlier, when Recanati says that a file's referent is determined relationally, he means that its referent is the object that the subject bears the relevant acquaintance (ER) relation to. Similarly, Recanati later writes:

The critical feature of mental files, qua non-descriptive modes of presentation, is that their reference is determined relationally rather than satisfactionally.<sup>63</sup>

But now consider the case of a mental file formed prior to and in anticipation of being acquainted with an object *o* that is the referent of the file and where the subject is right to anticipate being acquainted with *o*. This is what happens in the cases of acquaintanceless singular thought that Recanati allows, such as the Neptune case. Prior to acquaintance being secured in such a case, what makes *o* the referent of the file? *Precisely the fact that it satisfies the relevant description*. In the case of Leverrier's mental file for Neptune the reference fixing description would have been *the planet perturbing the orbit of Uranus*. But then it appears that by Recanati's own lights, a mental file formed in correct anticipation of becoming acquainted with an object *o* and whose referent is fixed by *o* satisfying some description *the F* is not a non-descriptive mode of presentation prior to becoming acquainted with *o*. For surely its referent at this point precisely *is not* determined relationally, but satisfactionally: by *o* satisfying *the F*. But then these sorts of files lack the feature that Recanati himself says is constitutive of a mental file being a non-descriptive mode of presentation: having their referents determined relationally. In turn, this means that, again by Recanati's own lights, we should not be able to have singular thoughts involving them, contrary to what he claims.

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<sup>62</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 36

<sup>63</sup> Recanati [2012] p. 57

Above I mentioned that Recanati was tentative in his endorsement of the claim that under the conditions specified above, one can have acquaintanceless singular thought.<sup>64</sup> In light of the criticisms I have made, perhaps Recanati would retreat to what he calls the Strong Acquaintance View on which singular thought *requires* acquaintance. On this version of Recanati's view, then, there is no acquaintanceless singular thought. The problem with this, as Recanati himself seems to recognize, is that in light of a wide range of examples due especially to Jeshion [2002, 2010] and Hawthorne and Manley [2012] such a view seems increasingly implausible.<sup>65</sup> That is, it seems plausible to think that in one case or another of the *many* examples produced by the authors just mentioned, we have acquaintanceless singular thought. As I suggested before, given the number and variety of examples, I think it would be very difficult for the Strong Acquaintance View to explain them all away. Of course, I've expressed skepticism about a methodology that rests on formulating theories of singular thought only on the basis of intuitions about whether singular thought is present or absent in particular cases. But this *is* the methodology that Recanati must endorse, given his claim that the having of singular thoughts is not systematically reflected in our attitude ascriptions by way of denying HARMONY and putting nothing in its place. So in the end I think Recanati faces a difficult dilemma: either embrace acquaintanceless singular thought and face the serious difficulties I have raised for his account or endorse the Strong Acquaintance View and try to explain away all alleged examples of acquaintanceless singular thought.

Let me close by noting something about the mental file view that I think *is* correct. It seems to me indisputable that we in some way bundle together information we

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<sup>64</sup> See Recanati [2012] p. 169

<sup>65</sup> See Recanati [2012] p. 147

take to be about the same individual. As Jeshion suggests, as new information comes in, we update the bundle. If we come to believe what we took to be two individuals are actually one, we merge the bundles and so on. Indeed, such bundling of information occurs in natural language processing and theories like file change semantics<sup>66</sup> and discourse representation theory<sup>67</sup> have tried to give theoretical expression to the metaphor of information bundling or mental files.<sup>68</sup> But what I question is what this has to do with the purported idea of a sort of thought that is in some sense directly about an object: singular thought. Suppose, based on my general knowledge of life in New York City, I say the following to you, who know nothing of New York life having just arrived from an upbringing in rural Missouri: “Somewhere in New York City right now a rich hedge fund manager is having dinner at a fancy restaurant with his wife. The clothes she is wearing cost more than most people make in six months. He is drinking a bottle of wine that few people could ever afford.” If you believe me, you certainly form an information bundle about a hedge fund manager and his wife. Indeed, you must do so to even understand me. My story may even sufficiently impress you that you retain the information bundles over time. But it strikes me as utterly implausible to think of there being singular thought in this case. Similarly, my wife has an Indian friend, Kalpana, who told her of a friend of a friend of a relative (Kalpana wasn’t sure which relative) who when he emigrated to the US confused the expressions ‘holy cow’ and ‘holy moly’ and would say ‘holy moly cow’. My wife has a “mental file” containing this information. Suppose in fact that several friends of the relative in question jointly made this mistake

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<sup>66</sup> Heim [1982, 1983]

<sup>67</sup> Kamp [1981]

<sup>68</sup> Recanati [2012] actually considers these sorts of uses of mental files, but claims they are derivative on the referential uses of files (pp. 172-77). Since to the extent I think there is anything like a mental file, I don’t think it has much to do specifically with reference or singular thought, I don’t agree.



and that this fact somehow did not get conveyed to the friend of the relative and hence not to Kalpana. Does my wife have singular thoughts about one of the offenders in virtue of “thinking through” the mental file in question? It seems to me not.<sup>69</sup> Finally, we even do information bundling by doing something like creating files when we are talking modally: ‘A bear could come into our camp. He would head straight for the food. If the food were in the tent, he would tear into the tent to get it. Even if he didn’t intend to hurt one of us, he might anyway.’ Similar remarks apply to storytelling: ‘One day, a boy decided to take a walk at midnight. He took a pack with him. It was filled with fruit and peanut butter sandwiches. He loved those things.’ Obviously, nothing like real world reference and singular thought is going on in these cases. So while the file metaphor may have something to recommend it, via the notion of clustering information, it simply does not seem to me that it has anything specifically to do with singular thought.

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<sup>69</sup> Thanks to Annie Papreck King for the example.

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