

## Singularism vs. Descriptivism?

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The distinction between singular and descriptive thought is widely, but not universally, endorsed in contemporary philosophy of mind and language. But a clear account of the distinction remains elusive, as do clear arguments in favor of the existence of singular thoughts. In fact, it is often disconcertingly unclear what, exactly, people who identify as *singularists* (who claim that there are singular thoughts about ordinary external objects) and people who identify as *descriptivists* (who claim that all thoughts about external objects are descriptive) disagree about. Here, I aim to set the stage for a clear account of singular thought by thinking about arguments in favor of the existence of singular thoughts. I aim to clarify the debate by examining the long-standing suggestion that singular thought plays an anchoring role with respect to thought in general. I also aim to move the debate forward by suggesting that some, but not all, of the putative disagreements between singularists and descriptivists are illusory once clarified, and that singularists can more productively argue for their view by separating it from some of the framework in which it is commonly packaged.

### 1. Singularism

There is a popular idea that some thoughts—that is, mental states—are direct, and some are indirect. To think *indirectly* about a thing is to think about it merely by thinking about the properties it possesses. Thus, someone might think of me, Rachel Goodman, as the only Australian in the philosophy department at Chicago Circle, and their thought about me would be mediated by a description that I satisfy and would exploit this relationship of satisfaction to single me out. To think *directly* about a thing, is to think about it without this kind of descriptive mediation—that is, to think about it, but not merely by *thinking* about the properties it possesses. Thus, someone might sit across the seminar table from me and think of me as *her*, despite not knowing where I'm from, or falsely believing that I am English or South African.

This distinction, between thinking of a thing merely in virtue of thinking of its properties and thinking of a thing directly, is the essence of the contemporary distinction between *singular* and *descriptive thought*. Despite the importance of tools from the philosophy of language for theorizing and understanding this distinction, it is meant to be one in the philosophy of mind, between kinds of mental state. Therefore, it is meant to be a distinction worth making because the two kinds are interestingly, psychologically different and, perhaps in virtue of this, play different roles in a larger theory of mind.

Note that the distinction has been introduced without saying anything about the *contents* of mental states. However, on what I'll call *the traditional picture*, we use a theoretical tool to understand the distinction: the tool of structured propositions. These are complexes of particulars, properties, logical operations and so forth, which are said to be the contents of mental states. The properties and/or particulars contained in a proposition that is the content of a given mental state are the things that the agent of the state thinks about directly. If a thinker thinks about a thing only *indirectly*, or in an attenuated sense, the content of her thought describes that thing without containing it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Russell (1905, 1910, 1912). A neo-Fregean version appealing to object-dependent concepts can be substituted if the reader prefers.

This leaves us with the question, ‘what kinds of things do we think about directly?’ or ‘what kinds of things are contained in the propositions that are the contents of our mental states?’. More specifically, ‘are there any *particulars* contained in the propositions that are the contents of our mental states?’, or ‘do we only think propositions that contain properties, relations, etc.?’. If we call propositions containing particulars *singular propositions* and propositions containing only properties and logical operations *general propositions*, the question is: ‘Do we have thoughts whose contents are *singular propositions*?’ ‘Secondly, if we *do* think thoughts whose contents are singular propositions, which kinds of particulars do they contain?’

Here, we can distinguish between what I’ll call the old and new versions of our traditional picture. *The old traditional picture* holds that some of our thoughts have singular propositions as their contents, but the particulars they contain aren’t ordinary external objects, like tables, chairs, human beings and so forth. Russell (1910, 1912) famously held the old traditional picture: he thought that the particulars contained in the singular propositions that are the contents of our thoughts were sense-data, and perhaps ourselves. In contrast, *the new traditional picture* says both that some of our thoughts have singular propositions as their contents and also that, *sometimes*, the particulars they contain are ordinary external objects.

The new traditional picture is the one held, with a caveat here and there, by those in the contemporary literature who identify as a *singularists* about thought.<sup>2</sup> How to (fairly) construe those in the contemporary literature who identify as *descriptivists*, and the nature of their disagreement with those who identify as singularists, is part of what’s at issue in what follows, and so will have to wait for now.

At this stage, however, we can ask what has made the new traditional picture seem appealing and/or convincing? It is fair to say there is both a clear history of influences, which has popularized the new traditional picture, and also a good deal of unclarity about what, exactly, that history establishes.

Historically, a central reason for the popularity of the new traditional picture is the fact that our central tool for theorizing the distinction between singular and descriptive thought—that is, the tool of structured propositions—has also been used in the philosophy of language, to theorise the semantic content of our linguistic utterances. This, combined with influential views about reference in natural language, and a simple, intuitive picture of the relationship between the contents of our utterances and the contents of the thoughts we express and ascribe with them—aided no doubt by influential externalist arguments that also make use of this picture<sup>3</sup>—suggests that many of our thoughts about external objects have singular propositions containing those objects as their contents.<sup>4</sup>

For example, Kripke (1970) is meant to have taught us that the content of a sentence containing a proper name is a singular proposition containing the referent of the name. Add to this the natural assumption that, when I sincerely assert a belief, this involves making an utterance whose content is the same as the content of my belief,<sup>5</sup> and it certainly *seems* that, when I communicate a belief about

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<sup>2</sup> The caveats are for singularists who instead appeal to Fregean structured contents, e.g. Evans (1982), McDowell (1984), Recanati (1993, 2012), Dickie (2015), and others), and for singularists who hold that empty thoughts can be ‘singular’ though they lack singular content (e.g. Burge (1977), Bach (1987, 2010), Jeshion (2002 2010), Sainsbury (2020), Taylor (2010), and others). I take it singularists agree that referential (non-empty) singular thoughts have (either Russellian or Fregean) singular content.

<sup>3</sup> Burge (1979), Putnam (1975).

<sup>4</sup> I hold that these influences are at least significantly responsible for the widespread philosophical popularity of the new traditional picture, not that these are the deepest motivations of singularists themselves. However, singularists have often allowed themselves to rely on these influences in supporting their view.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example Kripke’s (1979) *Disquotation Principle*, along with related principles like Recanati’s (1993) *Congruence Principle*, Jeshion’s (2001) *Accessibility of Content*, and Goodman’s (2018) *Semantic Content Accessibility*.

my mother by saying ‘Luciana Goodman is Italian’, my belief has a singular proposition containing Luciana as a constituent of its content.

Similarly, the simplest picture of attitude ascriptions says that a sentence with the form ‘S believes that P’ expresses a relation—in this case, the relation of *believing*—between a subject *s*, and the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘P’ in context. Add to this the fact that the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘P’ is, in many cases, a singular proposition containing an ordinary object, and, again, it seems that the t-conditions for ordinary attitude ascriptions are, frequently, that the attributee has a belief with a singular proposition containing an ordinary object as its content. For example, if I report that ‘Luciana Goodman believes that Rachel Goodman is not Italian’ it looks like the truth condition on my utterance is that the content of Luciana’s belief is a singular proposition containing me.

But, if we motivate the new traditional picture in this way, a problem arises. The very same (natural, intuitive!) assumptions about the relationship between the contents of thoughts and the contents of the utterances we use to express and ascribe them, in fact strain the distinction between direct and indirect thought in the philosophy of mind. The issues here come fast and thick, but the general idea is simple enough.

First, it seems very *easy* to introduce a proper name into the language, and so very easy to put oneself in a position to express one’s belief about an object using a name. Famously, we could introduce a name with an act of descriptive reference-fixing, stipulating that we’ll use the name ‘Julius’ to pick out the unique inventor of the zipper, if there is one. In principle, we could do this in *any* case in which we think about an object merely as the satisfier of a given descriptive condition.<sup>6</sup> Second, note that this alone seems to imply that, for almost *any* given mental state about a particular object, there will be *some* context in which that mental state can be truly ascribed with an attitude ascription whose t-condition is that it relates the agent to a singular content. Indeed, even without exploiting the admittedly, philosophically fraught possibility of names introduced by acts of descriptive reference-fixing, the way that ordinary attitude ascriptions appear to be governed by the diverse practical purposes of speakers and audiences seems to entail that putatively paradigm cases of descriptive thought can be truly ascribed with attitude ascriptions that relate their thinkers to singular contents.<sup>7</sup>

In short, the patterns of singular reference in natural language exert a kind of *pressure* on the new traditional picture: If, in any case in which an agent has an attitude to a general proposition that describes an object, her mental state can be expressed or ascribed with an utterance that has *singular* content, then it looks like we’ve made a distinction in the *philosophy of mind*, with no real difference behind it. And this makes the distinction between singular and descriptive thought look theoretically suspicious.<sup>8</sup> The same influence of the philosophy of language on the philosophy of mind that popularised the new traditional picture is also the source of a serious challenge, which singularists ought to take seriously.

There are certainly moves to be made in response (and they have found their way into the literature in various forms) but the *relationship* of those moves to the status of the singular/descriptive thought distinction is underappreciated. In a nutshell, the moves involve arguing that we should give up on our very simple picture of the relationship between linguistic and mental content. For example, that

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<sup>6</sup> Even if we think, like Jeshion (2009) that there are additional constraints on successful introduction of a name, this is enough to generate some form of the same the challenge.

<sup>7</sup> See Hawthorne & Manley (2012), Ch. 2 for a clear and compelling presentation of the issue. See also Taylor (2002), Chalmers (2011), Recanati (2012), Goodman (2018b), Openshaw (2018), Schiller (2019).

<sup>8</sup> Hawthorne and Manley (2012) take all this to provide an argument that there are no substantive non-semantic constraints on singular thought but still seem to allow that singular thought is a ‘cognitive natural kind’. Goodman (2018) argues, along the lines suggested here, that their ‘liberalism’ about singular thought is an unstable position. Bach (2014) also makes points along the same lines.

one can express one's belief with a name does not entail that the belief is singular; that one's mental state can be ascribed by relating her to a singular proposition does not entail that the content of that state is singular.<sup>9</sup> But, note this: to the extent that these moves are convincing, they also throw into question the support discussed above for the new traditional picture.

Here, I begin to lay some of my own cards on the table. Singularists who are unperturbed by the challenge to their view from within the philosophy of language are now under pressure to clarify and motivate their view. And, this is a good thing! If they are unimpressed by 'linguistic' challenges to the new traditional picture, then they should ask themselves if one ought to have found support for the new traditional picture by appeal to the behavior of names and attitude ascriptions—and, indeed, by appeal to intuitions about what it is natural or felicitous to *say* about the contents of mental states—in the first place. That is, we should view the challenge from within the philosophy of language, and the kind of response this challenge elicits, as an invitation to clarify (for ourselves and for descriptivists) why we thought the new traditional picture was true in the first place. Hopefully, the answer will be that there are reasons *internal to the philosophy of mind* to posit singular thoughts about ordinary external objects.

But here, we face the uncomfortable fact that these reasons—in some cases, familiar ones we often take for granted, or often appeal to in passing—have not been as clear, or as carefully articulated and argued as we should hope. It's time to fill this lacuna, if we can. If we can't, we may need to consider giving up the *new traditional picture*. Given this, it's worth noting that there are several ways that this might go. For example, one could adopt some form of the old traditional picture. Alternatively, one could separate our initial singular/descriptive thought distinction—that is, the idea of singular vs descriptive ways of thinking about a particular thing—from the structured content framework usually used to theorise it. Or, one could give up on that initial distinction entirely. Bearing these options in mind will help to clarify which commitments are doing which work in an overall picture, and which are dispensable, central, and so forth. It will also help to clarify the nature of the disagreement between those who identify as *singularists* and those who identify as *descriptivists* (indeed, it's not always obvious which of these ways of denying the new traditional picture amounts to 'descriptivism').

## 2. The Anchoring Role

Our question is whether there is motivation, internal to the philosophy of mind, for the new traditional picture. As we ask this question, our eye is on the commitments built into that picture, and the question of whether and how they earn their keep.

One way to approach the question of motivation is to think about the direct/indirect thought distinction in the context of a theory of intentionality and ask if, and in what way, direct, or non-descriptive, thoughts have any role to play in that theory. Here, a common idea—albeit one surprisingly, rarely spelled out at length—is that direct thoughts about external objects play an *anchoring role*: they anchor thought to the world around us.<sup>10</sup> A common *slogan* among singularists is that singular thought is required to anchor thought to the world of particular things. And, a common *claim* is that Strawson provides an argument to this effect, in *Individuals*.<sup>11</sup>

More is at stake in discussing the anchoring role than the question of *whether* there are singular thoughts about ordinary external objects. Discussing it will also help us better understand what it

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<sup>9</sup> See Sullivan (2010), Geirssen (2013, 2018), Goodman (2018a) for the first claim, and Bach (1997, 2010), Taylor (2002), Goodman (2018b), Openshaw (2018) for the second.

<sup>10</sup> See Russell (1910, 1912), Strawson (1959), Evans (1982), Burge (1977), Bach (2010), Dickie (2010).

<sup>11</sup> This claim is often contained in surveys of the notion of singular thought and of singular propositions. See, e.g., Fitch and Nelson (1997), Glick (2018), Nelson (2021).

means to reject this claim—that is, what, in addition to rejecting the new traditional picture, is involved in the so-called *descriptivism* about thought.

The claim of an anchoring role for singular thought is often accompanied by a nod to the following, famous passage, in which Strawson (1959) discusses the conditions for the success of purely qualitative descriptions that aim to pick out particular individuals:

One may be very well informed about a particular sector of the universe. One may know beyond any doubt that there is only one particular thing or person in that sector which answers to a certain general description. But this, it might be argued, does not guarantee that the description applies uniquely. For there might be another particular answering to the same description, in another sector of the universe. Even if one enlarges the description so that it incorporates a description of the salient features of the sector of the universe concerned, one still lacks a guarantee that the description individuates. For the other sector might reproduce these features too. However much one adds to the description of the sector one knows about—its internal detail and its external relations—this possibility of massive reduplication remains open.—Strawson (1959, 20)

We're asked by Strawson to imagine the possibility of a scenario in which the precise arrangement of qualitative properties instantiated in some *familiar* corner of the universe—say, Chicago IL—is reduplicated in some unfamiliar corner of the universe. The passage points out that we always lack a guarantee that any *purely qualitative* description picks out a unique object, because the possibility of this kind of 'massive reduplication' always remains open.<sup>12</sup>

The passage and its surrounding discussion is commonly said to contain an argument for the existence of singular thought, but what is the argument?<sup>13</sup>

Strawson himself uses his thought experiment to lay out, and respond to, a challenge to the possibility of *descriptive thought*, which he seemingly equates with non-demonstrative thought, about ordinary external things. I'll call this *the Strawson Challenge*.

The starting point for the Strawson challenge is the claim that it's always *epistemically possible*—in the sense of consistent with what we know—that the arrangement of properties in some familiar corner of the universe could be reduplicated in some unfamiliar corner. If this *were* the case, our attempted qualitative descriptive identifications wouldn't apply uniquely. Strawson thinks this means they'd fail of reference.<sup>14</sup> If it is always epistemically possible that we live in a massive reduplication universe, we can never *know*, for any descriptive identification, that it actually refers. And, this is a problem, according to the Strawson Challenge, because making reference to an object requires knowing that you have made reference to it. So, if the Strawson Challenge stands, whether or not massive reduplication is actual, descriptive identification is *always* thwarted, because the epistemic possibility of massive reduplication defeats the knowledge condition on successful reference.

Strawson's response to his own challenge is to save *descriptive* thought by claiming that all successful descriptive thoughts contain a demonstrative element that anchors them to particular objects around us. Strawson claims that it *is* possible to know that a descriptive thought succeeds of reference when it has a demonstrative element (because knowledge of reference would not, in this case, require

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<sup>12</sup> A 'purely qualitative description' is a description in terms of qualitative properties. Noting that there are certainly issues attached to properly defining this notion, I'll allow myself to appeal to it, and will think of qualitative properties as general properties, where the contrast is with properties that incorporate relations to particulars, picked out singularly.

<sup>13</sup> The argument itself is, surprisingly fairly rarely discussed in detail, or outlined clearly. Though see Fitch and Nelson (1997), Campbell (2002, Ch. 12, 249) Jeshion (2012), Dickie (2015, 69-72), Nelson (2021), and, especially, Brewer (1999, Ch.2), who discusses the argument in the most detail I'm aware of.

<sup>14</sup> There are other options. E.g., if Russell (1905) was right about descriptions, these thoughts would be systematically false. I'll set this disagreement aside for now, and allow for different options later.

knowledge that there is no massive reduplication), so the knowledge condition on reference can be satisfied through the presence of a demonstrative element in a(n otherwise) descriptive thought.

So, for Strawson himself, the moral is that demonstrative thought—thought that refers to its object in virtue of the fact that one perceives that object—is fundamental *in the sense* that all descriptive thoughts require (in order to pick out an object) a demonstrative component to guard against the epistemic possibility of massive reduplication.

The Strawson Challenge and the Strawson Response rely on two assumptions we might well reject, or at least prefer not to *rely* on. More importantly, I claim, they are unnecessary and don't point to the real moral of the massive reduplication thought experiment.

First, the Strawson Challenge relies on the assumption that massive reduplication is always epistemically possible. It's not obvious this is true, and there is no argument offered to defend this claim. I won't argue directly *against* this assumption here but it's worth noting that Strawson himself seems to rely throughout his discussion on the suggestion that knowledge requires certainty, in order to make it seem plausible.<sup>15</sup>

Second, why assume, as Strawson does, that one can't successfully think about an object without knowledge that you've succeeded? Again, no argument for this claim is found in Strawson, and I doubt it is intuitively plausible.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the assumption may be seen to have theoretical costs, in that it pushes us to give up on a way of thinking about what's distinctive and useful about purely descriptive thought. Here, I have in mind the idea that descriptive thoughts enable us to 'extend the range of thought' beyond the objects we know and interact with, precisely *because* it relies on the mechanism of property satisfaction. Armed with a stock of property concepts and the ability to generalize over objects, I can compose a descriptive condition. *If* the world is such that this condition is uniquely satisfied, I have thereby brought a particular thing into the range of thought, merely by relying on the mechanism of satisfaction—of an object happening to match the condition I've specified. If there is more than one thing or nothing at all that satisfies the descriptive condition, then I have failed to pick out a particular thing. But success isn't rule out from the start by the lack of a guarantee—or even the lack of *knowledge*—of a unique match.

The Strawson Response—that all descriptive thoughts have a demonstrative element—meets the Strawson Challenge on its own terms. This is not required (for reasons outlined next), and it effectively involves conceding that *purely descriptive thought* that is determinately about a particular thing, is impossible. Whether or not purely descriptive thought is *common*, preserving its possibility makes sense for the reasons above.

There is an alternative argument, however, also based on Strawson's thought experiment, which better shows the existence of thoughts that play an anchoring role. I'll call it the *Revised Massive Reduplication Argument*.

Imagine a whole system of thoughts that is descriptive in the sense that all the thoughts in the system single out objects insofar as those objects satisfy qualitative descriptive conditions laid out in the contents of the thoughts. And now imagine that there is *in fact* massive reduplication in the universe. If this is the case, then all of the thoughts in the system either fail of reference, are

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<sup>15</sup> One might hold that the possibility of massive reduplication is merely skeptical. Brewer (1999) attempts to argue that massive reduplication, and therefore failure through multiple satisfaction, is a genuine epistemic possibility in a way that failure through emptiness is not, but I'm unconvinced.

<sup>16</sup> Strawson's view might be related to his claims about definite descriptions in Strawson (1950). But his claim there, that uses of definite descriptions presuppose existence and uniqueness does not entail a knowledge condition. Relatedly, one might suggest it is infelicitous to use the definite article without knowledge of existence and uniqueness (perhaps one should make an existential claim instead in such cases). But, this is surely too strong. If there are conditions on felicitous use of the definite article, they're more likely to include *believing* there is, e.g. a unique F, rather than knowing there is.

indeterminate or are systematically false.<sup>17</sup> Now, ask yourself: if there were massive reduplication, would this make it the case that all of our thoughts about the particulars object around us would fail of reference, be indeterminate, or be systematically false?

I think the right response is this: even if the *actual* world were one in which there were massive reduplication, at least *some* of our thoughts wouldn't be affected. For at least some of our thoughts, how things are *elsewhere* is irrelevant to their intentional or referential success. Those thoughts would still be about the objects around us—those with which we interact causally, practically and informationally—even if there were duplicates in some far-distant corner of the universe, which we don't interact with. Which thoughts are these? Plausibly, the ones that are based on causal, practical and informational connections, like perception, to the particular things they are about. So, the moral *seems* to be that *some* of our thoughts aren't purely descriptive—plausibly, the ones that exploit causal, information connections to the particular objects they are about to establish their aboutness (I'll be more precise about the argument's conclusion in Section 3).

It's worth noting two points about our Revised Massive Reduplication Argument.

First, the Revised Massive Reduplication Argument does not assume either of Strawson's controversial premises.

The epistemic possibility of massive reduplication doesn't play a role. Instead, what's significant is simply the truth of the following counterfactuals. If there were massive reduplication, then purely descriptive thoughts would fail of reference, be indeterminate or be systematically false. If there were massive reduplication, it is not the case that all my thoughts would fail of reference, be indeterminate, or be systematically false.

The argument also doesn't rely on the premise that, in order to think about an object, one must know that one has succeeded. It therefore makes space for the case in which you think a purely descriptive thought and succeed because there *is* only one object that answers to a certain description, even though you don't have knowledge that this is the case.

Second, my Revised Massive Reduplication argument doesn't purport to show that purely descriptive systems of thought are not *possible*. If this is true, we need another argument to show why.<sup>18</sup> Our massive reduplication argument is more modest. It bottoms out in a basic commitment that if there *were* massive reduplication, this would leave the success of *some* of our thoughts undisturbed.

Why accept this basic commitment? There is no knock-down argument that we should, but there are broader theoretical considerations that speak in its favor (and these are related to the intuitive appeal of the commitment). The broader context of our discussion is an overall theory of intentionality for thoughts. The case to be theorized is a creature with a well-functioning perceptual system and a range of perceptual interactions with her environment, upon which she forms thoughts, beliefs, etc., about that environment. In asking about the status of the basic commitment our argument relies on, we can step back and consider two possible theories of intentionality. According to the first, the reference of some thoughts—let us say, the perception-based ones at least—is undisturbed by massive reduplication. According to the second, massive reduplication implies crash, falsehood or indeterminacy for all thoughts. But crash, falsehood and indeterminacy are all ways for a thought to *fail*, and the case being theorized is that of a creature whose interactions are going well and whose systems are functioning properly. To theorise this case as involving widespread representational failure is strange at best. This way of motivating the basic commitment undergirding our argument takes as its starting point that, overall, our task in giving a theory of intentionality is to explain how it is we manage (succeed!) to think about the world around us, and it takes as a basic case of intentional success

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<sup>17</sup> I'm now allowing for the possibility that descriptions are, e.g., Russellian—that is, allowing for different possible kinds of failure that would result from multiple satisfaction, depending on how descriptions work.

<sup>18</sup> Burge (1977) sketches an argument of this kind.

a thinking agent whose systems and interactions with things she interacts with are functioning well. This is not required, but is also not arbitrary.

### 3. **The Conclusion of Revised MR**

But, what *conclusion* can we draw from the Revised Massive Reduplication Argument? And, does the argument support the New Traditional Picture?

I'll state the argument's conclusion like this: some thoughts have a certain representational feature (are tokens of a certain representational type), which I'll put by saying that they are *referentially anchored*:

**A referentially anchored thought (type)** has the representational property of being about the same object when tokened in a massive reduplication scenario, as when tokened in a scenario with no massive reduplication.

Or, e.g., allowing that we might be Russellian about descriptions:

**A referentially anchored thought (type)** has the representational property of being such that, *if* it would be *true* if tokened in a scenario without massive reduplication, then it would also be *true* if tokened in a reduplicative scenario; and if it would be *false* if tokened in a scenario without massive reduplication, then it would be *false* and *false for the same reason* if tokened in a reduplicative scenario.

However, this does not establish the New Traditional Picture, for familiar enough reasons. There could be referentially anchored thoughts that aren't attitudes to singular propositions that contain ordinary objects. For example, thoughts about a red cube perceived by a thinker, which have contents that might be naturally expressed with (1)-(3), are all referentially anchored. But only (1) is naturally taken to express a singular content containing an ordinary external object.<sup>19</sup>

- 1) *This* (a particular red cube) is red.
- 2) The cube *I* (a particular thinker) am perceiving is red.
- 3) The cube that is the cause of *this* (a token mental state) is red.

My thought to the effect that the cube *I* am perceiving is red, would be about the particular red cube I were perceiving (if there were one), even if there were also a qualitatively identical cube, in a qualitatively identical segment of the universe, which I were not perceiving. *Seemingly*, this thought would be referentially anchored because it had a content that is singular with respect to *me*, not the cube I perceived. So, the Revised Massive Reduplication Argument leaves it open that all our referentially anchored thoughts have contents like those naturally expressed by (2) and (3). If so, the New Traditional Picture is false.

And indeed, those who identify as *descriptivists* often respond to the claim that there are singular thoughts about ordinary external objects by glossing their opposing conception of the contents of putatively singular thoughts about external objects—say, perception-based thoughts about ordinary external objects—with formulations like (2) or (3).<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in showing that there are referentially anchored thoughts, what the Revised Massive Reduplication argument really shows is that there is *some* singularity of a *certain kind* in thought. Firstly, the *kind* of singularity at stake is what I call *anchoring to particulars*, and may be thought of as singularity

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<sup>19</sup> This point applies to Strawson's version of the argument too.

<sup>20</sup> See Kroon (1987), Searle (1983), Jackson (2000, 2010, 2017), and the discussion in Chalmers (1995).



with respect to reference determination. That is, the point established by the massive reduplication argument doesn't concern rigidity, or what are sometimes call 'object-involving t-conditions', but rather the failure of *qualitativism* about *mental reference determination*.<sup>21</sup> In a massive reduplication scenario, for any purely qualitative description 'the F', there will be two actual Fs, so such descriptions will fail of reference, be indeterminate, or be systematically false. But, in a massive reduplication scenario, our thoughts would not universally fail of reference, be indeterminate or be systematically false. This shows that a purely qualitative theory of what makes our thoughts about particular objects is false. Secondly, the argument merely shows that there is *some singularity or other* of this kind because, for example, what's sometimes called 'causal descriptivism'<sup>22</sup> allows for non-qualitative reference determination, even though it denies singularity with respect to ordinary external objects, and instead posits singularity with respect to a privileged kind of object like an *agent* or a *token mental state*.

And, indeed, whether or not they gloss their content claims in the ways represented by (2) and (3), contemporary descriptivists are what I will call *anchored descriptivists*, rather than *pure descriptivists*.<sup>23</sup> Their positions concerning the representational contents of mental states make space for referentially anchored thoughts, but they resist the new traditionalist claim that some thoughts have singular propositions containing ordinary objects as their contents. Both singularists and descriptivists posit referentially anchored thoughts. The disagreements seem to arise when we reach beyond this to say something about the nature of those referentially anchored thoughts.

In the next section, I'll outline the way that debate (or, in some ways, lack of debate) between new traditionalists and descriptivists tends to go. But first, I want to flag a question, so we can return to it later. The fact that descriptivist opposition to the new traditional picture is sometimes glossed with formulations like those in (2) and (3) makes it natural (for singularists at least) to construe anchored descriptivists as proponents of the old traditional picture. That is, it's natural to take descriptivists as conceding (or being obliged to concede) the need for singular propositions as the contents of some of our thoughts, but as maintaining that they are singular with respect to some privileged class of particulars, like *agents*, *token mental states*, etc.. However, this might misrepresent the nature of the disagreement (and the extent of potential agreement) between new traditionalists and anchored descriptivists. This should come as no surprise, for we have surely noticed that most 'descriptivists' don't make use of structured content frameworks to start off with.<sup>24</sup> So, we can't *straightforwardly* classify them as proponents of the old traditional picture. This might be a merely terminological hiccup, but we should at least wonder about the extent to which this is the case.

#### 4. The Over-Attribution Objection and Misattribution Response

So, how does the debate between new traditionalists and anchored descriptivists go?

The singularist posits thoughts with contents that are naturally expressed by (1): contents that are singular propositions containing ordinary objects. Anchored descriptivists gloss their opposing content claims about the same cases with formulations like those in (2) and (3).

In response, proponents of the New Traditional Picture appeal to what I will call *the over-attribution objection*.<sup>25</sup> This is, essentially, the objection that the anchored descriptivist's content claims are psychologically implausible, because too sophisticated.

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<sup>21</sup> See Recanati (2012, Ch.2), and Sainsbury (2020) for discussion of varieties of singularity, and see Chalmers (2018) for the language of 'qualitativism'.

<sup>22</sup> Kroon (1987)

<sup>23</sup> Searle, (1983), Kroon (1987), Jackson (2010), Chalmers (1995). See Jeshion (2012) for the distinction between 'internally anchored descriptivism' and 'pure descriptivism', and Recanati (2012), who calls anchored descriptivism 'relational descriptivism'.

<sup>24</sup> Searle (1983) is unusual in doing so.

<sup>25</sup> Jeshion (2012) calls this 'the richness objection'.

There are variations on this objection to be found in the literature, but here is a representative sampling:

‘Searle’s [causal, token reflexive] theory of satisfaction conditions does not match the facts of mental ability’—Burge (1991, 206)

‘The problem with Searle’s apparent view is not that ‘the contextual features on which perceptual and indexical beliefs depend *cannot* themselves be entirely represented as part of the intentional content’, for any possible notion of intentional content. The problem is that the notion of intentional content that one obtains by including such features does not correspond to our cognitive states or mental abilities.’—(Ibid, 210)

‘The complexity involved in [an anchored descriptivist assignment of content] is unmotivated for we can adequately capture the phenomenology of experience and explain our mental abilities by postulating a content that does not have the causal component and the self-referential component that [the descriptivist, in particular, Searle] suggests’—Soteriou (2000, 181)

‘...the [descriptive] Fregean is likely to say that the reference-fixing description must be something like ‘what I am now seeing’ or ‘what I am now touching’ (FN: Russell would say that, in such examples, the description is ‘what is causing these sense data’). But this supposes on the part of the subject, reflective abilities the exercise of which does not seem to be required... The subject need not reflect on her perceptual relation to objects in order to have thoughts about the objects she perceives...’—Recanati (2012, 30)

‘2-D Relational Descriptivism entails that acquaintance relations are always represented as part of the content of singular thoughts; but this is debatable, to say the least. Kripke and many others have argued that acquaintance relations themselves need not be represented. For example, what determines the reference of the name ‘Aristotle’ in language or thought is a communication chain leading back to Aristotle, but users of the name need not have any thought regarding the communication chain, nor do they need to have the very concept of a communication chain’—(Ibid, 23)

‘...token reflexive descriptions can only be grasped by fairly sophisticated users of the language, able to reflect upon the relations between token-representations and objects in the context in which these representations occur. Indexical thinking indeed exploits these relations but in no way presupposes the ability to reflect on them.’—(Ibid, 34)

Allowing for variation, the over-attribution objection can be put like this. The proposals in (2) and (3), anchor an ordinary perception-based thought to a particular red cube by claiming that the thought employs property concepts that pick out, not just the properties of *red-ness* or *cubic-ness*, but also those of *being a cause*, *being perceived*, and so forth. But, surely we don’t need to use, or perhaps even have, concepts of causation or perception to think about red cubes that we perceive.

Descriptivists, it seems fair to say, are almost entirely unmoved by this criticism. They frequently respond by pointing out that their content claims don’t carry the *kind* of psychological commitments that would make them problematically sophisticated, or psychologically implausible. For example, depending on the particular version of the over-attribution objection in question, a descriptivist might respond that the claim she makes about the content of a given thought does not entail that the

descriptive content is *consciously entertained*, or *occurrently represented*, or *explicitly thought*, or *something the thinker would be in a position to specify* etc.

I'll call this *the misattribution response*. Again, there are variations, but here are some examples:

'A standard objection is that [the descriptive content claim] is 'too complicated or sophisticated' ... But this objection is based on a misunderstanding. I am not claiming that the perceiver thinks to himself in words the sentence in the brackets or even that the perceiver has any consciousness of this articulation of these conditions at all...The theoretical representation is a second-order characterization of a set of first-order psychological facts... The complexity is a matter of the theoretical representation and not a matter of the first order psychological facts.'—Searle (1991, 228)

'RDC [rigidified descriptive cluster theory of mental content] is a *semantic* proposal about the content of terms that purport to refer, not a [proposal about] psychological mechanism. And such terms have their contents fixed by proper interpretation...on the basis of our dispositions to assert sentences containing such terms of various hypothetical concrete and word-mediated scenarios, and also to directly name and describe various scenarios.'—Mendola (2008, 310-1)

'The objection is that the kinds of properties we have mentioned are fancy ones that philosophers of language and unusually alert members of the folk might think of; they are not properties ordinary, folk speakers associate with words... Sometimes it is obvious which properties are associated with a word. Perhaps the speaker tells us loud and clear. But typically the association is implicit or tacit rather than explicit. It is something we can extract in principle from patterns of usage, not something explicitly before their mind. I know this way of putting things—familiar though it is—will ring some alarm bells. Some will want to say that if the association is in the mind, as the description theory says, it must be explicit. They think of appeal to implicit or tacit in this context as a kind of cheat—a way of saying something and then taking it back.'—Jackson (1998, 13-4)<sup>26</sup>

'Sometimes philosophers are suspicious of entities such as primary intensions because they see them as reminiscent of a "description" theory of reference. But descriptions play no essential part in this framework; I use them merely to flesh out some of the character of the relevant functions from possible worlds to extensions. It is the function itself, rather than any summarizing description, that is truly central. This picture is quite compatible with the "causal" theory of reference: we need simply note that the primary intension of a concept such as "water" may require an appropriate causal connection between the referent and the subject. Indeed, we are led to believe in a causal theory of reference in the first place precisely by considering various ways the actual world might turn out, and noting what the referent of the concept would turn out to be in those cases; that is, by evaluating the primary intension of a concept at those worlds.'—Chalmers (1996, 58-9)<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jackson goes on to say more about 'implicit association' (see also, Jackson (2017)), but more on this below. Also, Jackson is talking here about linguistic reference, but he holds the same view about mental reference (personal communication).

<sup>27</sup> Chalmers is responding to a concern that is slightly different (but related) to the over-attribution objection here. It's useful to include his remarks, however, since (along with Jackson's) they articulate what I take to be the spirit of the response that interests me.

Allowing for variation across different versions, the general sentiment is that the descriptivist's position is being misunderstood by those who make the over-attribution objection, because her content claims are not 'psychological' in whatever *problematic* way the new traditionalist is assuming them to be.

Care is required to fairly represent what's being denied. For example, Searle, in his remarks above, comes close to denying that he is making claims about psychological facts at all.<sup>28</sup> But this can't be right by anyone's lights, since everyone agrees that there's an important sense in which content claims about mental states are psychological claims. A much clearer version of the response is found in Jackson and Chalmers. They certainly (and rightly) claim to be making psychological claims, but ones of a particular kind. Their content claims are said to encode the *referential dependency patterns* for an agent's thoughts, which are meant to reveal certain sorts of psychological facts about the agent.<sup>29</sup> That is, their descriptive content claims are meant to capture the conditions under which an agent's mental state (type) would refer to this or that object. Such contents encode how reference (for concepts) and truth (for whole thoughts) depends on the presence of a certain arrangement of properties in the (actual) world. Thus, for example, in the case of a perception-based concept whose content we might gloss with (2), the idea is that the content encodes the fact that the thought is about *whichever object* has the property of *being the red cube I perceive*. On this view, if you've given a (correct) specification of how the world would have to be for a thought to be true (or of how an object would have to be for a concept to be about it), then you've given a specification of its content.

So, the response to the charge of psychological implausibility or 'over-attribution' is something like the following. The descriptivist's content claims are not about whichever psychological features would make them beholden to something *other* than reflection (either by theorists or thinkers themselves) about how the world would have to be for the whole thought in question to be true, or how an object would have to be in order for the concept in question to refer to it. That is, their content claims are not about whichever psychological features would make them beholden to certain tests that (descriptivists think) singularists are illegitimately applying: for example, 'Is this description something the agent *consciously entertains?*', '*... occurrently represents?*', '*...explicitly thinks?*', '*...would be in a position to specify?*', etc..

My account of the misattribution response is imperfect (later sections of the paper are partially about clarifying it), but I hope we can see that the account is on the right track, by noting that there is an alternative *kind* of response to the over-attribution objection that descriptivists *could* go in for, but don't. They could respond by *defending* the claim that what's being consciously entertained, or occurrently represented, or explicitly thought, etc. *is* captured by (2) or (3). The fact that this is *not* the usual response, I will suggest, should be taken as a clue as to what commitments are central to the anchored descriptivist's view.

## 5. Anchored Characters and Representation\*

It is common for the debate between those who identify as *singularists* and those to identify as *descriptivists* to stall with some version of the misattribution response to the over-attribution objection. Singularists hold to the charge of psychological implausibility, descriptivists take the charge to underestimate their view, and the result is an impasse (and mutual irritation).

I'll aim to make progress, in this section, by illustrating two points. Firstly, something *has* gone wrong when singularists make the over-attribution objection, at least against the best versions of anchored descriptivism. There is *some* legitimacy to the charge of misattribution. But, secondly, in acknowledging this, we should *also* see that there is a question about representation that singularists

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<sup>28</sup> His claim that content claims are not 'first order psychological facts' is genuinely unclear to me.

<sup>29</sup> The question of what sorts of psychological facts they and don't actually reveal is addressed in Sections 5 and 6.

are interested in, which descriptivists (by their own lights) don't take a stand on. In the next section, I'll claim that, given what descriptivists say about their own content claims, it's unclear that their *arguments* target (what should be) the singularist's central claim.

I begin with something of a diagnosis of what has gone wrong when singularists make the over-attribution objection. In a nutshell, singularists make the charge of over-attribution because they view anchored descriptivists as, essentially, proponents of the Old Traditional Picture. They thereby work under an assumption that the kind of fineness of grain involved in there being referentially anchored thoughts involves structured content, and then work with a common set of assumptions, according to which structured content attributions involve commitments concerning a certain sort of psychological question (which I'll say more about, below).<sup>30</sup>

But, it will be a point familiar to *descriptivists* that accommodating referential anchoring does not require attributions of structured content. Referential anchoring involves there being tokens of representational types that would be about the same objects if tokened in a world with massive reduplication, as if tokened in a world without it. This means that referential anchoring can be captured by positing representational types characterized *in terms of* what objects they would be about if tokened in this or that scenario. And this can be done, without appeal to structured content, in a function-theoretic framework.

One version of this approach applies something like Kaplan's notion of *character* to mental states.<sup>31</sup> If we take *characters for mental states* to be functions from scenarios in which the state-type is tokened to the reference they would have if tokened in that scenario, then we can state the conclusion of the Revised Massive Reduplication Argument as one about the nature of the characters of some mental states.<sup>32</sup> Namely, those characters are such that the state-types in question have the same referents when tokened in a world with massive reduplication as in a world without it. As I'll put it, the conclusion is that some of our mental states have *anchored characters*. For example, we might say that the anchored character of a perceptual demonstrative thought is the function that takes us from a world considered as actual to the object perceptually attended by the agent of the thought at that world (or, from a world considered as actual to the object that is the perceptual cause of the subject's *tokened perceptual experience* at that world, etc.).

But, what commitments *are*, and are *not*, involved in the attribution of a certain anchored character?

To assign an anchored character to a mental state is to claim that it is a token of a type characterized by a certain referential dependency pattern. For example, in our perceptual demonstrative example, it is to claim that, *if* the actual world is such that an object *a* is the object perceptually attended by the agent of the thought, then that thought is about *a*; *if* the actual world is such that an object *b* is the object perceptually attended by the agent of the thought, then the thought is about *b*, and so forth. But what an assignment of a particular anchored character does *not do in itself* is take a stance on *how* (psychologically, in a sense to be spelled out next) a thought with this particular referential dependency

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<sup>30</sup> My formulation of this point is imperfect as it stands, since it might imply that singularists don't *realise* that two-dimensionalist frameworks are available, which don't employ structured content (and, of course, they do know this). The assumption is rather that the fineness of grain required for referential anchoring means that anchored descriptivist content attributions carry the sorts of commitments that would come with *their* attribution of a content that could be glossed with (2) or (3).

<sup>31</sup> I won't discuss the different versions of the approach, since they're well-known and the point I wish to make applies in virtue of the general approach (but see, e.g., Lewis (1979), Jackson (2000, 2010), Chalmers (1995/2002, 1996)).

<sup>32</sup> Of course, for Kaplan himself, *character* is a function from context to content, which is itself a function from circumstance to extension. But, since, for rigid terms, character does determine extension, I'll allow myself to talk, in describing my notion of character for a mental state, of a function from scenarios to reference. In any case, other variations of the approach (e.g. Chalmers (1995)) work in the way mine does, in this respect.

pattern is achieved in the thoughts of creatures like us. And *my* suggestion is that singularists are (or perhaps should be) interested in precisely this sort of psychological question.

To see what sort of psychological question this *is*, and then to see why anchored character attributions don't take a stance on it, we can look to the contrast between the sentences, (S1) and (S2):

(S1) I am tired

(S2) The agent identical to me is tired

(S1) and (S2) have the same anchored character but, I take it, there is a legitimate and familiar notion of *representation*, according to which they are representationally different. This is that they achieve their shared anchored character by different compositional means. (S2), but not (S1) achieves its anchored character in a way that involves representation of the relation of identity—that is, it involves a compositional component, or step, whose role it is to represent *identity*.

It's plausible that an analogous notion of representation can be applied to mental states. If we wish to mark the fact that it is not the *only* legitimate notion of 'representation', we can do this by dubbing it *representation\**.

The kinds of considerations that illustrate that there is indeed a legitimate notion of *representation\** for thought are familiar arguments for the conclusion that thought is *structured*, in a particular sense. There are different ways to spell out the relevant notion of structure, which the singularist may choose between. One is in vehicular terms. According to a *representational theory of mind*, whole thoughts—states that have *anchored characters*—involve vehicles of representation, and these vehicles are themselves composed of redeployable sub-vehicle types, whose role is to isolate and represent properties, relations (and maybe objects!) in particular, repeatable ways. Another is found in Evans (1982), and involves the claim that any whole thought involves the use of distinct and redeployable *abilities*—call them 'concepts', if you want—whose role is, again, to isolate and represent (in particular, repeatable ways) the objects, properties, relations, etc. that the whole thoughts they are employed to entertain, are about.<sup>33</sup> I won't rehearse the arguments in favor of the existence of structure in thought, since they are, again, well-known.<sup>34</sup> However, the general idea behind them is that we can best explain, e.g., the productivity of our thinking abilities, and the way these abilities pattern in systematic ways, by positing whole thoughts with compositional structure, which make use of redeployable vehicle types, and/or redeployable representational abilities.<sup>35</sup>

However, if thought *is* structured in this sense, then there is a question about the compositional structure for a mental state, which anchored character ascriptions don't take a stance on. Thoughts structured like (S1) and (S2) have different compositional structure, but they have the same anchored character. A thought with the structure of (S2) *represents\** the relation of identity, whereas a thought with the compositional structure of (S1) does not.

## **6. Implications for the New Traditional Picture and Anchored Descriptivism**

The next point I wish to make is that being clear about the nature of anchored character attributions and *representation\** has implications for the way that anchored descriptivists sometimes argue for their view (and, indeed, for their opposition to the New Traditional Picture).

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<sup>33</sup> See Rescorla (2020) for the suggestion that the first way of understanding this idea is more fundamentally understood in terms of the second. And see Camp (2009) for discussion of the relation of different ways of spelling out structure in thought.

<sup>34</sup> My claim is of course not that these arguments are indisputable or uncontroversial. On my presentation, rejection of the claim that thought is structured in the relevant sense (either in terms of vehicles *or* abilities) would be reason to reject singularism. See, e.g., Evans (1982) for an illustration that this is not an arbitrary connection.

<sup>35</sup> Fodor, (1975, 1987), Fodor and Pylyshyn, (1988), Evans (1981, 1982).

Once we have introduced the notion of *representation\**, we have also introduced a contrast between *two different roles* that a property can play in a theory of reference for mental states. On the one hand, a property can play what is certainly *an* explanatory role with respect to the reference of a mental state, in the sense that reference supervenes or depends on possession of that property. Thus, possession of that property earns a legitimate place in our theory of reference. On the other hand, the property can be *represented\**.<sup>36</sup> However, the former does not entail the latter. For example, if my thought is an *I*-thought, then being the referent of that thought indeed supervenes on *being the thing that's identical to me*. But this does not entail that the compositional structure of my thought is correctly represented by (S2).

This contrast allows me to further clarify my diagnosis of what goes wrong when singularists make the over-attribution objection against anchored descriptivism. New traditionalists make this objection because they are interested in a question about the compositional structure of mental states and take the anchored descriptivist's content claims to take a stance on this. They think some of our thoughts are referentially anchored, and they are interested in *how* a thought with a certain anchored character is psychologically, compositionally achieved for creatures like us (what abilities are employed, or what vehicular structure is in play?). That is, they are interested in which properties, relations, or indeed objects, are *represented\** in a mental state with a certain anchored character. They may be wrong to lodge the claim of implausible ascriptions against certain anchored descriptivists, but their question itself seems to be a legitimate and important one.

Thus, the contrast also allows me to illustrate the sense in which some anchored descriptivists' claims and argumentative strategies simply do not touch singularists who are clear about the contrast. More sympathetically put, given the way descriptivists sometimes argue for their views about content, they are more *charitably* interpreted as simply not taking a stance about *representation\** (about the question of how anchored characters are achieved in the thoughts of creatures like us).

The most compelling descriptivists sometimes claim that the *very fact* that we can make assessments about the referential dependency patterns of thoughts by *describing the distribution of properties that make for reference* is evidence that the relevant properties are part of the mechanism of reference, and thereby appropriate to mention when glossing the content of those thoughts.<sup>37</sup> A related way of arguing for descriptivism is as follows. If we start with the idea that representational features are *dependent* features, and note that nobody should want a *magical* theory of reference, then we should acknowledge that, in any given case where we have a mental state that is about an object, *a*, rather than an object, *b*, then there will be *some* property that *a* possesses and *b* lacks, that explains this fact. The property might be a *relational* one (like *being the object perceived by the thought's thinker*) but this is nonetheless a property possessed by the object *in virtue of which* the thought is about that object.<sup>38</sup> For what it's worth, I grant this last point (I don't favor the view that the mind tracks haecceities). But, if arguments like these are given, then what they show is that the properties in question play the first role, not the second. They show, perhaps, that the properties in question have a legitimate role in a theory of reference *in the sense* that they make a systematic difference to which object is referred to, or that reference supervenes on possession of them. They don't show that the properties in question are *represented\**.

To sum up, what's gone wrong with the over-attribution objection is that it can legitimately be claimed to misunderstand the content claims being made by sophisticated anchored descriptivists, even if they *are* sometimes glossed in terms like those in (2) and (3). But, I've also tried to show that

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<sup>36</sup> A related distinction, employed by diverse thinkers in different ways is between a property playing a causal vs a computational role (Pylyshyn (2006)). And see Campbell (2002, 2013) for discussion of the idea that it is often important to distinguish between different *roles* properties can play with respect to reference or experience.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., Jackson (1998, 2000, 2003), Chalmers (1995/2002).

<sup>38</sup> Jackson (2000, 2003)

this response—that is, that anchored character assignments (or content attributions of similar form) take a stance on referential dependency patterns, which reveal properties that reference depends on— itself comes with the implication that these content attributions do not *in themselves* serve to oppose singularist claims about how particular anchored characters are compositionally achieved for creatures like us. The singularist has some non-obscure reasons to think that thought is structured, and she is, on my proposed version, committed to some claims about the particular structures of certain thoughts with anchored characters. There is indeed a good question to be asked about how to *justify* those particular claims but, equally, the descriptivist’s content claims and forms of argument don’t defeat them, or even target them.

At the end of Section 1, we noted different possible ways of rejecting the New Traditional Picture. The claims I have now outlined suggest a path for singularists, whereby they might in principle separate their initial distinction between singular and descriptive thought from the structured content framework with which it is usually packaged. Their claim is about the structure of certain thoughts with anchored characters (it is about the nature of the abilities or vehicles at use in such thoughts). Whether there are ‘singular thoughts’ about ordinary external objects depends on how the range of referentially anchored thoughts in creatures like us achieves their referential anchoring. It depends on what properties, relations, and/or objects are *represented\** in those thoughts.<sup>39</sup>

To be clear, I am not claiming that singularists are thereby obliged to give up on structured content, or even that unstructured content views are preferable. But I do hold that our claims about the structured contents of mental states are essentially used to capture fine-grained *representational\** features of those mental states,<sup>40</sup> and also that separating the central singularist view (that there are singular thoughts about ordinary, external objects) from claims about singular propositions has the benefit of clarifying the question that we are interested in, and of avoiding impasses based on equivocations on, or intractable debates about, ‘*the content*’ of certain mental states.<sup>41</sup>

## 7. Conclusion: Agreements and Disagreements

I’ve suggested here that singularists might more productively argue for their view by being clear about the question that concerns them, and I’ve also suggested that this is a question about *representation\**. Furthermore, I’ve suggested that taking descriptivists’ arguments and responses to the over-attribution objection seriously implies that they don’t (legitimately) take a stance on this question. This may in turn suggest that I hold there to be no real disagreements between so-called ‘singularists’ and ‘descriptivists’. This is not the case, nor do I think the discussion here implies it in the end. I do think, however, that the disagreements are often mislocated or obscured, and that my suggestions here point out *one* way in which this is the case.

I’ll end by taking stock of some agreements and disagreements.

Firstly, I take my discussion of the over-attribution objection, the mis-attribution response, and the contrast between roles a property can play in a theory of reference, to illustrate that we (New

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<sup>39</sup> I hope it’s therefore clear that my suggested view is not simply a variation on standard two-dimensionalism. The question I say singularists are interested in is not captured with *secondary intensions* or *content* in Kaplan’s sense. Our discussion of the conclusion of the Revised Massive Reduplication Argument in Section 3 illustrated this. On my view, they’re interested in how anchored characters are *representationally\** achieved, not in patterns of reference at worlds considered as counterfactual.

<sup>40</sup> And I dispute that claims about vehicles/abilities are as smoothly distinguished from claims about content as some have held (e.g., e.g., Stalnaker (1984). I see the position in Rescorla (2020) as potentially aligned with my suggestions.

<sup>41</sup> It also avoids the possible implication (which descriptivists sometimes unfairly complain about, but which singularists sometimes illegitimately lean on) that the idea of an object ‘in’ a proposition *in itself* explains anything. This is not to say that objects can’t be constituents of propositions, just that this is a way of modeling something (to be explained) not an explanation of anything.



Traditionalists, and Anchored Descriptivists) agree (or *ought* to, in any case) about the way that reference for anchored thoughts is determined, in the sense that we agree about what it supervenes on. For example, we agree that the class of thoughts about external objects for which massive reduplication wouldn't make a difference are the class of thoughts for which possession by an object of some relational property (like *being the object perceived*) determines reference. That is, we agree that, when one has a perception-based thought about an object, *a*, what *makes* it the case that one's thought is about *a* (rather than about *b*, or nothing at all), is the fact that *a* is the object one perceives. Thus, we should be careful about the sense in which we take the debate between singularists and descriptivists to be a disagreement about reference-determination (that is, whether it goes by way of properties or not). Singularism of the kind I'm proposing, claims that some of our anchored thoughts (those that are singular with respect to ordinary external objects) achieve their anchoring by employing object-directed abilities (or vehicles), but they don't thereby deny that relational properties (like *being the object perceived*) have a role in reference-determination.

Secondly, it is *open* to us to agree about *particular* anchored character assignments. However, this implies something more controversial, which only some singularists will go in for. If we agree about particular anchored character assignments, then we agree, not only that one's perception-based thought is about an object, *a*, if it is, because *a* is the object one is perceiving, but also that a mental state of the same type—that is, with the same character—would have been about a distinct object, *b*, had the actual world been one in which *b* were the object one perceived. Thus, agreeing with anchored descriptivists about particular anchored character assignments will entail agreement that there is a legitimate *content-typing* such that two agents, both thinking perceptual demonstrative thoughts, but about different particular objects, could be thinking thoughts of the same type. There are certainly singularists who care a lot about *object-dependent* thoughts, who would dispute that this kind of typing for mental states is a *content* typing.<sup>42</sup> However, singularists don't need to take this stance, and many don't. And, in fact, to allow that there is a legitimate content typing that goes by way of *object-independent* anchored characters does not imply there are no purposes for which we will want to type our mental states in *object-dependent* terms. Whether *representation\** motivates this sort of typing is itself a question we can ask, for example.

But, even if we agree about all of this, the way I've framed things does leave us with a sticking point. Our two camps start out working with different notions of 'representation'—one concerned with the dependence or supervenience of referential facts, and one concerned with *representation\**. I've suggested that these notions can co-exist, but a conflict seems to arise insofar as both camps put their preferred notion to work in solving Frege's Puzzle. It's at the heart of the view that thought is structured (either by redeployable vehicles, or abilities) that *difference* of type, in this respect, accounts for the existence of Frege cases, and *sameness* of type accounts for the existence of *coordination* or *de jure coreference* in thought. Similarly, those who posit character-like content for mental states (*primary intensions*, *a-intensions*, etc.), take this dimension of content to account for the same phenomena—those of cognitive significance and rational relations between mental states. Thus, our two camps assign the same role to two different kinds of sameness and difference. It is perhaps unsurprising that those who identify as *singularists* and those who identify as *descriptivists* about thought disagree about the solution to Frege's Puzzle, but I hope the way I have framed (one aspect of) the debate between them, allows us to focus on this disagreement and its significance in a new way.

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<sup>42</sup> Evans (1982) McDowell (1984).

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