

Singular Thought without Significance

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ABSTRACT: The main purpose of this essay is critical. I focus on Robin Jeshion's (2002; 2004; 2010) theory of singular thought, and I offer three objections to her Significance Condition for the creation of mental files. First of all, this condition makes incorrect predictions concerning singular thoughts about insignificant objects. Second, it conflicts with a theoretical aim mental file theories usually have, that of accounting for our ability to track discourse referents. And third, it appeals to a vague notion where a clear-cut notion is needed. In the final section, I suggest that there are more plausible alternatives to the Significance Condition that the mental file theorist could appeal to, and which do not face the problems mentioned.

KEYWORDS: Jeshion – Significance Condition – singular thought.

1. Introduction

There is an intuitive distinction between two kinds of beliefs, doubts, intentions, and other propositional attitudes, or, in general, *thoughts*. My thought that *this computer [the one I am working on right now] is slow* is very different from my thought that *the inventor of the wheel was a genius*. In the former case the thought has a certain directness and aboutness that lacks in the latter case. Roughly speaking, this is the distinction between singular and general thoughts, or *de re* thoughts vs. *de dicto* thoughts. In Recanati's terms,

an object may be given either directly, in experience, or indirectly, via descriptions. Nondescriptive modes of presentation are ways the object is (directly) given to the subject in experience, while descriptive modes of presentation are ways the object is (indirectly) given via properties which it uniquely instantiates. (Recanati 2010, 148)

While a descriptive mode of presentation is a set of satisfaction conditions, such that the object presented is *whichever* uniquely satisfies those conditions, a non-descriptive mode of presentation presupposes “a representational connection” (Bach 2010, 58), or “a *real* connection” (Salmon 2010, 68) between subject and object. This requirement is usually called in the literature, following Russell (1910, 1912), an *acquaintance relation*. Russell uses the term to refer to a direct (in a strict sense) relation between the mind and an object it perceives, which allows for no intermediate conceptual representation of the object. The more recent notion is much relaxed, apt to be called *extended acquaintance*, as McKay (2012) suggests. It is the latter notion that plays an important part in contemporary discussions of singular thought.

Different versions of acquaintance theories are available in the literature. Some authors treat acquaintance as an *epistemic* condition on singular thought. Thus, Gareth Evans writes that, “in order to be thinking about an object or to make a judgment about an object, one must know which object... it is that one is thinking about” (Evans 1982, 64). Other authors treat acquaintance as a *causal* relation that secures referential success. Kaplan (1969), Burge (1977), Bach (2010), Recanati (2010; 2012), Salmon (2010) and others propose similar conceptions of acquaintance. According to most such views the acquaintance requirement is fulfilled in cases of direct perception of an object, memory of direct perception of an object, other perception-based relations (e.g. I am acquainted with an object even if I perceive only its shadow, but not the object itself), but also communication-based relations (e.g. Kripkean causal-historical links through which I am related to an object if I use its name with the right intentions), and maybe other causal relations as well.

Acquaintanceless theories of singular thought do not impose any such requirement on a thought to be singular. Hawthorne – Manley (2012, 24–25) call ‘liberalism’ all positions that reject the claim that an acquaintance relation is required for singular thought. An example of this is Kaplan’s (1970) Semantic Instrumentalism. On his view, I can think a singular thought about the first child born in the 21st century by way of a descrip-

tively introduced proper name, or a *dthat* expression. These are both directly referential expressions, and so their contribution to content is the object they refer to.¹ Mark Sainsbury in Sainsbury (2005) defends an acquaintanceless theory on which singular thought requires singular content, but singular content does not require there to be an actual object that it is about. A content is singular whenever the subject employs an *individual concept*, which may be vacuous, i.e. not object-dependent. If such singular thoughts are possible, then acquaintance is not a necessary requirement.²

A different, orthogonal, distinction to that of acquaintance vs. acquaintanceless theories of singular thought opposes theories that require singular *content* and theories that require only a certain kind of *presentation* of the content entertained (call the latter *cognitive* theories of singular thought). The distinction is orthogonal because there are theories on which singular thought requires singular content, but singular content does not require acquaintance with an object. Both Kaplan's (1970) and Sainsbury's (2005) approaches are content theories, but at the same time acquaintanceless theories of singular thought.

2. Jeshion's Significance Condition

In a number of articles, Robin Jeshion develops a theory of singular thought that does not require being acquainted with an object (see Jeshion 2002; 2004; 2010). Thus, it belongs in the category of *acquaintanceless* theories. At the same time, on her theory, singular thought does not require entertaining a singular content, which makes it a *cognitive* theory. The singularity of thought is explained by the cognitive role the thought plays in the agent's internal mental organization. According to this view, cognition creates singular thoughts by creating mental 'files', or 'dossiers', in which information that is intended to be about a certain individual – although it may turn out to be about various individuals, or about none – is stored. Mental files are not constituents of thoughts – they are not like

¹ Kaplan (1989, 604-607) qualifies his view, reaching a more moderate position.

² "The category of mental states in which an individual concept is used to think about an object", Sainsbury writes, "is... not the category of acquaintance, since it includes thoughts containing individual concepts which lack a referent" (Sainsbury 2005, 240).

Fregean senses – but rather ways in which the information is organized.³ On her view, a singular thought is a thought that uses information from a mental file. Jeshion writes:

Singular thought about an individual is structured in cognition as a type of mental file... One thinks a singular thought by thinking *through* or *via* a mental file that one has about the particular object. By contrast, descriptive thoughts occur *discretely* in cognition. (Jeshion 2010, 129)

Jeshion's dissatisfaction with acquaintanceless theories is, in part, that they tend to see the formation of singular thought as being under the voluntary control of the subject. For instance, Kaplan's Semantic Instrumentalism "supposes that we can *will* a singular intention. But how? By thinking harder, more intensely, with feeling?" (Jeshion 2010, 125). She thinks that the introduction of mental files is not under our control: we cannot do it at will, and we cannot refrain to do it at will. Jeshion writes that "cognition creates singular thoughts for us and we cannot put a halt to them" (Jeshion 2010, 127).

To achieve this desired result, Jeshion introduces the *Significance Condition*, which establishes a necessary condition for the creation of a mental file, and so for the possibility of singular thought:

a mental file is initiated on an individual only if that individual is significant to the agent with respect to her plans, projects, affective states, motivations (Jeshion 2010, 136).

The Significance Condition (SC, for short) is a *necessary* condition, not a sufficient one. It may be that there are cognitively impaired subjects who are not able to form mental files, not even for very significant objects. But when everything else goes well, SC triggers the formation of a mental file. No conscious intent is required, or causally relevant, for the creation of a file. Instead, it is significance that is responsible for the creation of the file. Thus, mental files are not created at will, but automatically triggered by cognitive processes, and in particular, by significance. The claim that SC conditions the formation of mental files is, according to Jeshion, an empirical claim, based on empirical research into perception, cognitive psycholo-

³ As Zoltán Szabó observes, "mental files are representations generated partly on basis of pragmatic principles, they are not to be confused with semantic representations..." (Szabó 2000, 53 n.11).

gy, and cognitive linguistics (cf. Jeshion 2010, 130). However, I think SC fails. In what follows I give three arguments to the effect that that SC does not establish a necessary condition for singular thought.

3. The problem of insignificant singular thoughts

SC is a requirement on the formation of mental files, and so, given that singular thoughts are thoughts from mental files, SC is also a requirement on what singular thoughts an agent can have. The theory predicts that whenever SC is not fulfilled (because a particular individual is not significant to the subject) we are not in position to form a singular thought about that individual. This prediction receives support from intuitions, Jeshion (2010) argues. She introduces various scenarios to make this point, any of which are good enough for my present purposes. Consider the following one:

You are running along the edge of the Pacific Ocean and see a trail of footprints in the sand. You think to yourself, “Man, he has big feet.” You have no interest whatsoever in discovering whom [sic!] the big-footed runner is, and no standing general interests in foot sizes. As you run along, you give no further thought to the footprint. (Jeshion 2010, 115-116)

Do you have a singular thought about the big-footed runner? Jeshion thinks you do not, and comments that the case offers intuitive evidence in favour of SC: the person that left is *not significant* to the runner, and intuitively there is *no singular thought*. She adds that we should not be confused by the fact that the speaker uses the pronoun ‘he’, which is usually analysed as an indexical that picks out the relevant object in the context, as the pronoun ‘he’ very well be used attributively (i.e. non-referentially). In fact that is how it should be analysed in this case, as you cannot choose in this scenario to use the pronoun as a device of deferred reference at will, Jeshion (2010, 126) argues.

While we may agree that the intuitions about the above case offer support to SC, there are clear cases in which intuitions run contrary to it. Even if a situation is such that an object or person is insignificant to us, intuitively we can still entertain singular thoughts about it.⁴ Let us slightly

⁴ This problem is also briefly mentioned in McKay (2011).

change Jeshion's scenario and imagine that the sentence the subject utters is 'Man, those are big footprints'. The person who left the footprints is insignificant to the runner, but *the footprints are equally insignificant* to her: as in the original scenario, she gives no further thought to the footprints. But intuitively now she *does* entertain a singular thought about the footprints in question. Many more examples of this ilk may be produced: I suddenly realize that *that thing on the window* is a fly; *that* is the bird the cat is looking at; *that car* turns right etc. Such thoughts about insignificant objects we perceive and think about for a moment are very common. Intuitively, they should be characterized as being *about* an individual, which we *have in mind* for a short while, and not about *whatever* satisfies a certain description. So, the subject *could* have a singular thought about an object that is not significant to her. And, therefore, the SC is contradicted by intuitions.

The above examples are not only intended to suggest that it is *metaphysically* possible to have a singular thought about an individual that is insignificant to the subject. That claim would not refute Jeshion's SC, because SC is an *empirical* claim. And one cannot reject a general empirical claim invoking the metaphysical possibility of cases that contradict the general claim. But the cases presented above are not only metaphysically possible, but also as realistic as Jeshion's original case. The intuitions concerning (in)significance, as well as intuitions concerning the presence of singular thought are equally strong in both cases. So, there are realistic cases in which a singular thought is formed but SC is *not satisfied*. There is, it seems, evidence from intuitions *against* Jeshion's SC as a necessary condition for singular thought.

However, the defender of SC may find my examples unconvincing. In all of them, it might be argued, the object in question is significant *enough* as to draw the subject's attention to it for a moment and to get her to entertain a thought. The footprints are sufficiently significant for the subject to think about them. Therefore, it may be replied that my scenario is compatible with SC: the footprints are significant, and the thought is singular.

But clearly this move is not available to the defender of SC, as it commits her to saying that the big-footed runner is *also* significant to the subject: he is significant *enough* for her to get her to entertain a thought 'about' him (in a broad sense of the term, not limited to singular thoughts); but then SC predicts that she does form a singular thought on the big-footed runner. This contradicts the intuition (or, at least, Jeshion's intuition) that the thought in question is *not* singular. Moreover, Jeshion ex-

plicitly denies that the big-footed runner is significant to the subject. She maintains, as we have seen, that the big-footed person is *insignificant* to the subject running on the beach. SC is not fulfilled on a certain object whenever the subject entertains a thought (of whatever kind) 'about' that object.

In general, if the defender of SC suggests that all objects we think 'about' (in a broad sense of the term) are significant to us simply because we entertain such thoughts, then it follows – given SC – that we open mental files on them. But then singularity is predicted on a too wide range. My thought that *the 50th person I saw in my life is probably from my hometown* turns out to be a singular thought *about* that person. That person is significant enough to entertain a thought 'about' him or her, and so SC is fulfilled; therefore, I automatically open a mental file on him or her, the argument goes, and I think the thought through that mental file; and so, it is a singular thought. This is intuitively incorrect. And, therefore, the reply to my objection does not work. In fact, this reply is not at all in the spirit of Jeshion's understanding of SC. Jeshion does not seem to have in mind such an inflated notion of significance. On the contrary, she seems to use the word with its non-technical, customary, meaning.

A different reply to the present objection to SC (suggested by an anonymous referee) goes as follows: all the examples that I have given above of singular thoughts about insignificant objects involve direct perceptual contact with the object; and it may very well be that having direct perceptual contact with an object is enough to treat it as significant to the perceiver. If this is so, these cases are not counterexamples to SC. However, I find no indications in Jeshion's texts that she intends to postulate such a close link between significance and perception. On the other hand, we do have singular thoughts about insignificant objects that are not perceived, such as, for instance, numbers: I have a singular thought about the number 97, when I answer '97' to the question 'How much is $43 + 54$?'. But it may very well be that this result is not at all significant to me. I might just be helping my interlocutor check his calculations. We also do have singular thoughts that are conveyed to us through communication with, for example, proper names. When asked who wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I might answer, absent-mindedly, 'Aristotle'. I am entertaining a singular thought about Aristotle although the philosopher might not have any particular significance to me, at least not in the context of that dialogue.

4. The problem with insignificant discourse referents

Here is a second objection to SC, this time one that does not involve considerations concerning singular thought. I will start with a reminder of the fact that, in the present state of the theory of mental files, this concept is nothing more than a metaphor that is meant to offer insight into various cognitive phenomena. One such phenomenon is that of singular thought, but it is not the only one. For instance, mental files are useful in offering a perspicuous psychological explanation of Frege puzzles, as they allow for a very fine-grained way of individuating singular thoughts (see Hawthorne – Manley 2012, 17; or Recanati 2012, 91f). They are also used in accounting for our ability to track the objects we perceive (cf. Recanati 2012, 80f). In general, they are particularly useful in what concerns *organizing* the information – i.e. the contents – of our minds. Their function is to connect different contents, and separate them from other contents. We organize and reorganize our contents when we become aware that *this* thought about X and *that* thought about Y are actually ‘about’ the same individual (in a broad sense of ‘about’). When I realize that whoever made *these footprints in the sand* also made *those footprints in the sand*, I am connecting two contents. When I realize that, say, *the inventor of the lightbulb* is not the same person as *the inventor of the moving pictures* (as I might have wrongly believed) I am separating two contents. In situations such as these the metaphor of mental file carries importance and becomes theoretically useful. In other words, mental files are useful for tracking *co-reference* (in a wide sense of the term ‘reference’, including not only ‘real’ reference, but also discourse reference).

The notion of *discourse reference* was introduced by Karttunen (1976), and is meant as an extension of the notion of the notion of ‘real’ reference, applicable to the entities a discourse is ‘about’, and used to account for the phenomenon of cross-sentential anaphora. As Heim (1983) puts it,

a definite NP has to pick out an already familiar discourse referent, whereas an indefinite NP always introduces a new discourse referent... [D]iscourse reference is distinct from reference, and..., in particular, an NP may have a discourse referent even when it has no referent (Heim 1983, 225)

A fictional character might be introduced in a story at one point by using an indefinite description (e.g., ‘A woman was sitting at the table in front of me’), and then reference to her may be made later by using, for in-

stance, a definite description (“The woman had a drink”). Our ability to do this requires an explanation. We might think of mental files as the psychological devices responsible for tracking discourse referents. As Szabó (2000) notes,

what we need is something that enables us to keep track of the speaker’s story by remembering what sorts of things was talked about and what was said of them. We should think of files as mental representations which help us in doing this. (Szabó 2000, 38-39)

The use of the definite description, Szabó suggests, determines the creation of a mental file, in which additional information about the character is added later on.

If a theory of mental files takes on board this theoretical desideratum it must allow for files to be created even for *insignificant* individuals, which are introduced in discourse at a certain point. Not all characters in a story or individuals mentioned in discourse are significant, even if repeated reference is made to them. Moreover, a character may be introduced in a story and never mentioned again later on. The subject may end up forgetting that that character was ever introduced in the story. It may be a totally insignificant character, one that plays no relevant role in the subject’s understanding of the story. However, suppose that when the character is introduced the hearer *expects* it to be mentioned again. In that case presumably she opens a mental file in order to keep track of it and connect the further information she expects to receive. So a mental file may be created even for insignificant discourse referents that are introduced but quickly forgotten about. But then it is just implausible to suggest that the discourse referent must be significant to the agent for the agent to create a mental file on it. If we restrict the formation of mental files by way of SC then we lose the explanatory power that they have relative to co-reference to discourse referents that are insignificant to the speaker.⁵

⁵ An anonymous referee suggests that, if Jeshion wants to maintain the claim that singular thought is thought *via* a mental file, she would have to be talking about *special* mental files, distinguishing them from the files for the cross sentential anaphora examples above. This highlights the point: Heimian files are necessary but not sufficient for singular thought. The problem then for Jeshion would be to distinguish the two kinds of mental files. While I think this is an interesting suggestion, it amounts to giving up

5. The vagueness problem

Let me finally discuss a third objection to SC. A further reason for raising doubts concerning SC is that there is a mismatch between SC and what it is a requirement for, i.e. the formation of mental files. The mismatch consists in the following: the concept of *significance* is naturally *vague*, while the distinction between having and not having a singular thought is presumably a *clear-cut* one. Jeshion does not tell us how exactly we are to understand ‘significance’, so presumably the word is used with its usual meaning, which is in the vicinity of *importance*, or *relevance* to one’s purposes, projects, affective states or so. These are, of course, vague concepts. But, presumably, there are no borderline cases for the concept of a mental file. And the same applies to the concept of a singular thought: there is nothing vague about the claim that a thought is singular, or that it is not singular, for that matter. It is true that there are cases in which the intuition of singularity is less strong than in others. We could, in those cases, talk about *vague intuitions* of singular thought. However, most accounts of singular thought draw a clear-cut distinction between cases of singular thought and cases of purely general thought. In particular, this seems to be Jeshion’s view as well: for any thought whatsoever her theory presumably aims to make clear predictions of whether it is formed through a mental file or not. It is difficult to see how vagueness could feature in her account of singular thought.

To illustrate this last point, consider a variation of Jeshion’s scenario of the footprints in the sand. In this version, the subject running on the beach is not indifferent to the person leaving the footprints, but instead she starts to wonder who he was; seeing that there are no other footprints on the sand except her own and those she discovered, she starts to think that they seem to be the only ones in the community enjoying a run in the morning; maybe they discover they have other things in common as well; maybe they could be good friends if they found each other; and so on. For such reasons the subject attaches cognitive significance to the person that made the footprints, starts looking for him, tries to find out who he is etc. Concerning a scenario such as the latter, Jeshion admits (Jeshion 2010,

SC as it is, i.e. as a necessary criterion for creating mental files. It would indeed require telling a very different story about mental files than the one Jeshion tells.

126-127) that the subject's cognitive organization will open a mental file on that person, once he becomes significant to the subject.

Now, we can imagine a whole series of cases such as the above, ranging from cases in which the significance to the subject of the person who left the footprints ranges from virtually zero to very significant. Given that the concept of significance is a vague concept there is no clear-cut point that separates cases in which the individual *is* significant from cases in which he *is not* significant. That means that there will be borderline cases of significance. According to SC, significance is a necessary condition for forming a mental file, and so for forming singular thoughts about an individual. But for borderline cases it is undetermined whether they are cases of significance or not, and so it is undetermined whether the condition is fulfilled or not. The condition is vague, so it gives a vague answer to the question whether (if everything else goes well) the agent forms a particular mental file or not.

What could the SC theorist reply to this objection? Let me start by mentioning a reply that does not seem promising. The SC theorist might argue that, if borderline cases are cases for which it is not true that the individual is significant to the agent (although it is also not false that it is significant), then these cases are not relevant; according to SC, a mental file is formed in those cases in which something *is* significant to the subject; borderline cases are not of that kind; therefore, the reply goes, the existence of borderline cases is irrelevant to SC. But this reply will obviously not work. Let us assume a borderline case x of a concept F is indeed such that it is not true that x is F and it is also not true that x is *not* F . All the semantic and metaphysical facts about x and F do not determine a truth-value for the propositions mentioned. But, as Sainsbury (1996) argues, it is not only the existence of borderline cases that characterizes vague concepts, but also the *inexistence of boundaries*, i.e. the impossibility to separate clear cases from borderline cases. If it were possible to isolate borderline cases, then the reply discussed here could work: one could simply say that cases of insignificance *as well as* borderline cases of significance do not trigger the formation of mental files. As it is not possible to reply in this way, the problem of vagueness remains: for vague cases of significance it is indeterminate whether SC is fulfilled, and so whether a mental file is created or not, and consequently, whether a thought could be singular or not.

A second – more promising – way to reply to the vagueness objection on behalf of the proponent of SC is to change it into SC* by replacing the

ordinary vague concept of *significance* with a new concept, that of *significance**, which does have clear-cut borders. By definition, there is always a clear answer to the question whether a certain object is significant* to a subject or not. So it is always determinate whether a certain case fulfils SC* or not.

While this reply sounds promising, it requires finding a suitable definition for the concept of *significance**, which bears its entire burden. But it is not easy to see how this concept could be defined. The mental file theorist may opt for postponing the introduction of the concept of *significance**, invoking the fact that the investigation into cognition is still in its early stages. It is not reasonable, she may argue, to expect a concept of significance with clear-cut borders to be easily available, so the task should wait until future research could provide us with one. Thus, SC* is not a condition one can take off the shelf and just use it, but rather a part of an empirical program of investigation. This position is actually in line with Jeshion's empirically minded approach to significance as a condition for the creation of mental files.

It seems to me the reply diminishes the force of the initial objection. But at the same time it raises a new worry, as it is not so clear that to believe that the concept of *significance** may be determined by future scientific investigation is more than wishful thinking. In any case, the defender of SC* should tell us what relation this concept bears to the customary notion of significance. Is the relation similar to that between *pain* and *C-fibre firing*, that is, identity? Or is it more like that between the ordinary notion of a *proof* and the logical concept of a *proof*? Or like that between the intuitive notion of *speaking a language* and Chomsky's notion of *cognizing* the principles of Universal Grammar? Unless we are told what notion *significance** is, the reply reduces to claiming that *there is* an interesting notion that could replace that of significance in the formulation of SC in such a way that the vagueness problem is avoided. But that is no more than an unsubstantiated promise.

A third possible reply on behalf of the defender of SC is the following: instead of introducing a novel notion – that of *significance** – she could argue that it is possible to identify the *level* of significance (assuming it makes sense to talk this way) that triggers the creation of mental files. The customary concept of *significance* (as well as concepts such as that of *importance*, *value*, or *relevance*) seems to be intrinsically gradable. So it is plausible to think that, if significance triggers the creation of

mental files, there is a level of significance at which this occurs. Remember that not any level of significance will do: the author of the footprints is significant *enough* to the runner for her to think 'about' him (that he, or whoever made these footprints, has big feet) but still, intuitively, this is not a singular thought. So we need to know *how* significant something must be for a mental file to be created. An approach to SC along these lines might be advisable anyway in order to make it work. Our intuitions about significance are not uniform across contexts, and vary from person to person. So we should not expect that the SC condition could be of any rigorous use unless it is possible to determine what level of significance triggers the creation of a mental file.

But this reply is not without problems. One worry is, again, that this is no more than a promissory note. Another worry is that, given that the triggering level of significance is not introspectively accessible, but a matter of future empirical study, it is questionable that SC could be defended by appeal to intuitions. But this is precisely what Jeshion does, as we have seen. It is scientific investigation that should tell us whether a certain individual reaches the relevant level of significance for an agent, and not introspective judgements. And the results of future research may contradict our intuitions about significance. For instance, Jeshion's claim that the big-footed runner is not significant to the subject, and so no mental file is opened, is based on an intuitive evaluation of significance. But future scientific investigation may show that the threshold is actually very low, and the big-footed runner is *sufficiently* significant for a mental file to be created. In that case the subject's thought is formed through a mental file, and so it is predicted to be singular, contrary to intuitions (or, at least, to Jeshion's intuition) that no singular thought is entertained about the big-footed runner. This way out of the vagueness problem creates further problems for Jeshion's defence of SC by appeal to our intuitions.

6. Mental files without SC

I have argued so far that Jeshion's SC fails for three reasons: because it makes incorrect predictions concerning singular thoughts about insignificant objects, because it does not allow for a theory of mental files to account of our ability to track insignificant discourse referents, and because it appeals to a vague notion where a clear-cut notion is needed. But how

should a theory of mental files without SC look like? I am not going to develop here a full-blown proposal for a theory of mental files, and I am not going to engage in detailed argumentation. I merely suggest a possible alternative that might be useful in thinking about an account of mental files without SC.

Suppose that, following Szabó (2000), we want a theory of mental files to account for our ability to track discourse referents. In as much as we are talking about *conscious* thoughts – and all the examples discussed so far are of this kind – why not say that the creation of mental files is triggered by the fact that we believe that two contents are ‘about’ the same individual (i.e. they ‘co-refer’, in a broad sense of the word, to the same individual)? I am suggesting that the facts that trigger the formation of a mental file on an individual could be the subject’s belief that there is (linguistic or mental) co-reference to that individual. When we become *aware* (or simply come to *believe*) that X is actually Y we need to organize our thoughts ‘about’ X to include the information ‘about’ Y, and so we need to open a mental file for that purpose. Of course, belief of co-reference does not entail *actual* co-reference. We might open a mental file and put in it information about contents that we *take* to be co-referential, although actually they are not.

If this suggestion is correct, then a mental file theorist could replace SC with a condition according to which a mental file is initiated *only if the subject believes she has (or expects to have in the future) several thoughts* – or other propositional attitudes – *that are ‘about’ the same individual*. Call this the Tracking Condition (as an anonymous referee suggests). If the Tracking Condition is correct, then one isolated thought about an individual does not trigger the opening of a mental file. However, if other thoughts ‘about’ that individual are entertained later on, a mental file is opened. This suggestion avoids the vagueness problem, as the concept of belief is not vague. It also avoids the problems that SC faces with respect to discourse referents. On the present proposal, mental files might be used to explain our ability to track discourse referents, including insignificant ones.

What about accounting for singular thoughts about insignificant objects? One reason why the mental file theorist might appeal to SC (or some similar principle) in the first place is the following: if singular thought is thought through a mental file, and if mental files come too cheap, the theory predicts the occurrence of singular thought in cases in which the intuitions do not clearly support this prediction. Consider again Jeshion’s initial case of the big-footed runner. The theory must predict that the subject

does not form a mental file in which information about the author of the footprints is stored. If no mental file is created the thought is not *through* a mental file, so it is not singular. This is what SC does: it prevents a mental file from being created on the big-footed runner.

This conclusion seems correct. If the mental file theorist wants to explain singular thought as thought through a mental file, then she should agree with Jeshion's verdict that no mental files are opened in this case. However, she should not agree with the reasoning that gets Jeshion to this verdict, as this involves relying on SC, which, I have argued, is probably false. But we reach the same verdict in this case if we use the alternative condition for creating mental files that I have suggested. Given that the subject does not give a second thought to the big-footed runner, the thought bears no interesting relation to other thoughts. It occurs *discretely* in cognition, as Jeshion puts it. There are no co-referential relations established, or expected to be established, with other thoughts. So, according to the Tracking Condition, no mental file is opened on the big-footed runner. Instead, a mental file is created only if we encounter co-reference or expect future co-reference.

But, although the Tracking Condition makes the right prediction about Jeshion's initial case (the thought 'about' the big-footed runner is not singular), it faces a similar problem to the one SC faces. In that case, the problem was that there are singular thoughts about insignificant objects which do not fulfill SC. Here, the problem is that intuitively there are singular thoughts about objects on which the Tracking Condition is not fulfilled. These are objects that we never think about again, nor expect to do so in the future. I have suggested that we are in position to have singular thoughts about such objects on a regular basis. But if no co-reference is made to them then no mental file is opened on them. There is no reason to open a mental file on a thought that occurs *discretely* in cognition – as Jeshion puts it. Therefore, the theory of singular thought as thought through a mental file combined with the Tracking Condition for creating files predicts that we do not have a singular thought in those cases. My suggestion, therefore, cannot account for *all* cases of insignificant singular thought. It only accounts for singular thoughts about insignificant objects that we do happen to track across discourse or context.

The problem with the Tracking Condition is actually even worse than that (as an anonymous referee emphasizes): the Tracking Condition is both *too weak* (as it predicts no mental file is formed for an insignificant individual

we do not track in discourse or context, but about which we might form singular thoughts), and *too strong* (as it predicts mental files are formed on discourse referents that we have no singular thought about). So, while the Tracking Condition might be useful in explaining our ability to track discourse and real referents, it seems to have little relevance to the question of singular thought. In view of these difficulties, it is not at all implausible to suggest that it is the singularity of *content* – not of the way the contents are organized in cognition – that accounts for the perceived singularity of thoughts. Maybe we should not expect a mental file theory to explain intuitions of singularity. Instead, the singular thought theorist should switch to a traditional account of singular thought as object-dependent thought.

However, suppose the theorist does want to stick to the view that singular thought is thought *via* a mental file. In that case, a possible solution might be to distinguish between normal Heimian files that the Tracking Condition creates, and special files that explain the singularity of thought by appealing to other mechanisms, such as acquaintance. One view that takes acquaintance to be causally relevant in creating mental files is Recanati's (2012). According to his acquaintance-based theory of mental files, these are non-descriptive modes of presentation of objects:

a file (token) exists, or should exist, only as long as the subject is in the right acquaintance relation to some entity; a relation which makes it possible for him or her to gain information concerning that entity. (Recanati 2012, 61)

The creation of a mental file is, on this account, subject to a normative requirement: a file “should come into existence only if the subject stands in the appropriate contextual relation to some entity” (Recanati 2012, 60). On this account a mental file might be opened on the basis of an existing acquaintance relation even if the object is not significant to the subject. Therefore, the theory does not face the objection of singular thoughts about insignificant objects.

I am not suggesting the mental file theorist should simply take Recanati's theory from the shelf and combine it with the Tracking Condition. Here is one reason why this is not possible: the role that acquaintance plays in Recanati's theory is similar to the role that significance plays in Jeshion's theory, and tracking plays in the above formulation of the Tracking Condition. That is, each of them is conceived as a *necessary* condition for the creation of mental files. If the mental file theorist wants to allow for acquaint-

tance-based files *in addition to* the files that the Tracking Condition triggers, then these conditions need to be turned into sufficient (or maybe causally relevant, although not individually necessary) conditions for creating mental files.

However, it was not my purpose here to develop a theory of mental files or of singular thought. Instead, my purpose was much more modest than that: it was to point out a number of problems that a theory of mental files that appeals to Jeshion's Significance Condition leads to. As I have argued, it is doubtful that SC could be saved from these objections. But, I have suggested, there are various plausible alternative that do not face the same problems.

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