



Object-Dependent Thoughts

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Object-Dependent Thoughts

1. Introduction

Some thoughts are purely general in the sense that they make no reference to specific individual things. *Dogs are descended from wolves* and *There are infinitely many prime numbers* are both general in this sense. The first makes a statement about concrete spatio-temporal objects, but none in particular; the latter, one about abstract objects, but again none in particular. Most of our everyday thoughts, however, are singular or object-directed thoughts, in that they do make reference to particular individual objects, be they concrete or abstract. *Frege was a mathematician*, *You are not supposed to smoke in here*, *It is hot over there*, *That lime tree is tall*, *This yellow after-image is fading*, *I am leaving now*, *3 is a prime number*—these are all singular thoughts because each involves reference to a particular thing or things. As these examples indicate, singular thoughts (beliefs, judgements) are usually expressed by sentences containing proper names (e.g., ‘Frege’), indexical expressions (e.g., ‘you’, ‘I’ and ‘now’), demonstrative pronouns (e.g., ‘that lime tree’, ‘this yellow after-image’, ‘here’, ‘there’), and numeral names (‘3’). The debate over the nature of singular thoughts has been largely restricted to thought about concretely existing objects available to perception. This entry will discuss the controversial doctrine that singular thoughts are object-dependent. The following two sections expound the doctrine and note some of its allegedly paradoxical consequences. The next two sections sketch the central argument in favour of object-dependence and some objections to it coming from rival conceptions of singular thought.

2. Singular Thought as Object-Dependent

Some philosophers maintain that the mental contents of singular thoughts are *object-dependent*, meaning by this that the existence and identity of their mental contents depends upon the existence and identity of the objects those mental contents are about. For example, consider the thought *That is a lime tree* had by you while looking at a particular tree, where the italicised expression specifies the mental content of your thought. According to the doctrine of object-dependence, if, counterfactually, no tree at all had in fact been there to be singled out by you, owing perhaps to a referential illusion or hallucination—call this the “empty possibility”—then there would have been no singular thought content for you to entertain. Consequently, your psychological condition in this situation would be different from what it is in the actual situation. Moreover, if, counterfactually, your thought had instead singled out a qualitatively indistinguishable but numerically different tree—call this the “duplicate possibility”—then the resulting thought would have had a different content from the content it has in the actual situation. Again, your overall psychological state in this duplicate possibility is different from what it actually is.

First-person thoughts expressed with the indexical ‘I’ seem clearly to be object-dependent. The thought that you now express with the sentence ‘I am hot’ surely could not exist unless you did. Furthermore, no one else, not even your identical twin, could have had the very same thought. The thesis that singular thoughts expressed with other indexicals, demonstratives and proper names are object-dependent is, however, highly controversial, because of its allegedly paradoxical consequences.

3. Allegedly Paradoxical Consequences of Object-Dependence

It is a consequence of the object-dependent view that a thinker in an empty possibility could suffer the illusion of having a thought when he was not, because his would-be thought failed to pick out an object. But can we really be mistaken about whether we are having a thought? That the answer to this last question is No is the very reason why Russell notoriously restricted the possibility of genuine singular thought about particulars to those whose existence we cannot be mistaken about, namely, mental entities, such as after-images and other so-called “sense data.” A person may be mistaken about whether his is actually seeing a tree but not about whether he is having a visual experience as of a tree. Another allegedly problematic consequence arises when we consider the duplicate possibility. In such a case, everything will seem the same to you: the duplicate object (a qualitatively indistinguishable tree, say) does not appear to affect your conscious awareness in any way different from how the actual object affects it. Many of those opposed to object-dependence, such as so-called “internalists” about mental content, argue that in order for there to be a genuinely mental difference between the two cases you must be able to detect the difference.

4. The Central Argument for Object-Dependence

A number of different arguments have been advanced in favour of an object-dependent conception of singular thought. Many of these, especially those of Gareth Evans and John McDowell, involve a synthesis of key ideas of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell. Some of these arguments are unconvincing to their opponents because they rely on questionable epistemic principles as premises. For example, some of Evans’s arguments appear to rely

on an unacceptably strong reading of “Russell’s Principle” that, roughly speaking, in order to have a singular thought one must know which object it is that one is thinking about. Sometimes the debate over object-dependence hinges on the role of singular thoughts in action explanation. Here we shall briefly sketch the strongest argument in favour of object-dependence.

The argument has three main premises. The first is a very general claim about the nature of thought content, namely, that it is essentially representational, in that it represents the world as being a certain way. When you have what seems to be a (perceptual demonstrative) singular thought, for example, such as *That lime tree is tall*, your perception-based thought represents the world as being a certain way, namely, that that lime tree (the very one you are seeing) is tall. In other words, there is a certain condition necessarily associated with the thought—the thought’s *truth condition*—which is such that, if it is fulfilled, then thought is true and if it is not fulfilled then the thought is false. The second premise is specific to the nature of singular thoughts: the truth conditions in question must be genuinely singular. What this means is that when the truth conditions are stated, reference must be made, not just to any object fulfilling certain conditions, but to a particular object, namely the very object of your thought. It will not do, according to the object-dependent theorist, to state the truth conditions for your thought as follows: *That lime tree is tall* is true if and only if there is a lime of such-and-such characteristics and it is tall (see the next section for one way of filling out ‘such-and-such’). Rather, the truth conditions must make reference to the very tree you are seeing: *That lime tree is tall* is true if and only if that lime tree (the very one you are seeing) is tall. The third premise has two parts: (a) in the absence of any object (i.e., in the empty

possibility) it is impossible for there to be a singular truth condition; (b) in the presence of a different object (i.e., in the duplicate possibility) the singular truth condition will necessarily be different. From these three premises the object-dependent theorist infers that singular thoughts are object-dependent.

5. Rival Conceptions

Most parties to the debate accept the first premise. The second premise is challenged by those, such as John Searle, who, influenced by Russell's views, seek to give non-singular truth conditions based on quantificationally analysed definite description concepts. A definite description concept is a concept of the form 'the such-and-such', which purports to describe something uniquely. According to Russell's quantificational analysis, to say that *the such-and-such is so-and-so* is to say that *there is one, and only one, such-and-such and it is so-and-so*. For example, to say that the present king of France is bald is to say that there is one, and only one, present king of France and he is bald. If there is no such thing as the present king of France (because France is a republic) then the original statement saying that he is bald is not meaningless but simply false, because part of what it claims is that there is such a thing, and there is not.

We can apply Russell's analysis to our earlier example as follows: the thought *That lime tree is tall* is true if and only if the lime tree causing this very experience is tall, that is, if and only if there is one, and only one, lime tree causing this experience, and it is tall. On this analysis, if you are in an empty possibility, then, contrary to the doctrine of object-dependence, you can still have a thought, but your thought will be false. This approach to demonstrative singular thoughts seems problematic, however, for at least two

reasons. First, the truth condition in question implausibly over-intellectualizes thought content, counter-intuitively prohibiting ordinary people, children, and animals, who either do not possess or are not currently exercising the concepts of causation and experience, from having singular thoughts. Second, it assumes without argument the Russellian view that only demonstrative thoughts about mental phenomena (“this experience”) can be truly singular.

Opponents of object-dependence who accept premise two of the main argument, such as Tyler Burge, attack premise three. They seek to give genuinely singular but nevertheless object-independent truth conditions by employing a logic free of existence assumptions. Unlike classical logic, such a “free logic” is designed to incorporate non-denoting singular terms, such as ‘Pegasus’, and accordingly places restrictions on some of the classical rules of inference, prohibiting, for example, the inference (via the rule of existential generalization) of ‘There exists something that flies’ directly from the premise ‘Pegasus flies’. If such a non-classical free logic is employed, singular truth conditions for some statements containing non-denoting terms can be formulated. It remains to be seen, however, whether this relatively unexplored rival approach, whose genesis and application lies in formal semantics for natural languages, can be applied to all types of singular thoughts in a psychologically realistic way.

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See Also

Anti-Individualism about Cognition; Descriptions; Descriptive Thought; Indexical Thought; Knowledge by Acquaintance

Further Reading

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