

Topic: Humanities

Our use of Descriptive Names and Singular Thoughts

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Abstract

A descriptive name is a name whose reference is exclusively fixed by a definite description. In using a descriptive name, we have a descriptive thought that contains, as its component, the general concept expressed by the name's reference-fixing description. However, I believe that in using a descriptive name, we sometimes have a singular thought, or a thought that does not comprise such a general concept but in fact comprises the name's referent itself. To support my view I will first survey two prominent theories on this issue—Acquaintance Theory and Semantic Instrumentalism. Acquaintance Theory claims that in order to have a singular thought, we must first have an acquaintance relation to the object in question. This means that in using a descriptive name, we can never have a singular thought about its referent. On the other hand, Semantic Instrumentalism maintains that by simply using a descriptive name, we can always have such a singular thought, regardless of whether the very referent exists or not. In my opinion, the former idea is wrong in taking an acquaintance relation itself as a necessary condition for our grasp of singular thoughts, and the latter idea is implausible in that it cannot offer any tenable grouping of singular thoughts. Considering this, I will argue that it is our possession of proper information that is really essential to our grasp of such a thought, and we inevitably rely on our linguistic and social activities to obtain the appropriate kind of information.

Keywords

Acquaintance; Descriptive Names; Information; Singular Thoughts

1. Introduction

Suppose I wish to own a book-shop one day and name the shop "Sunny Sides." This name would refer to whatever uniquely satisfies the description "the book-shop that I own." "Sunny Sides" is a typical descriptive name, or a name whose reference is exclusively fixed by a definite description¹. Moreover, it is generally believed that in using a descriptive name, we have a descriptive thought that comprises, as its component, the general concept expressed by the name's reference-fixing description². However, I

¹ Famous examples of actual descriptive names include "Unabomber," which will be discussed later, and "Vulcan," which referred to the planet that was assumed to be circling inside Mercury's orbit. Examples of theoretical descriptive names include "Julius," which refers to the inventor of the zip (Evans (1982), (1985b)), and "Newman 1," which refers to the first baby born in the 21st century (Kaplan (1989a)), etc.

² Gareth Evans evidently supports this conclusion (Evans (1985b)) despite offering detailed arguments that seem to provide strong grounds against it (Evans (1982), (1985a)). My discussion in this paper draws considerably from those arguments, which claim that it is our possession of information derived from the relevant object that plays an essential

propose that in using a descriptive name, we sometimes have a singular thought, or a thought that does not comprise a general concept but the name's referent itself. This paper will support this view and clarify how we can arrive at a singular thought while using a descriptive name.

2. Preliminary Discussions

2.1. *Two theories considered*

To have a singular thought about an object is to think about the very object in question. This characterization implies that in order to have a singular thought, we have to think of an object in a very distinct way without thinking of it as the unique satisfier of any description. Consequently, what are the conditions required for us to have a singular thought? Concerning this, Robin Jeshion once pointed out two extreme positions and argued that one of them claimed too strong a condition for our having a singular thought about an object, and the other too weak a one³. To begin with, I would like to give a brief overview of these two positions—Acquaintance Theory and Semantic Instrumentalism—because I believe that each of them does include something worth serious consideration, although they do not seem to be tenable as they are just as Jeshion insisted.

Acquaintance Theory claims that, in order to have a singular thought, we must first have an acquaintance relation to the object in question. This claim requires that someone in our language-speaking community is acquainted with the object and identifies it as the unique bearer of the name⁴. However, a descriptive name is a linguistic device that is introduced into our language-speaking community without any relation to such an acquaintance or acquaintance-based identification. The use of a descriptive name in itself clearly does not constitute any acquaintance relation between the user of the name and the name's referent. If such a relation does exist between the user of the name and its referent, the name would not function as a descriptive name but would refer to the relevant object based on that acquaintance relation. In other words, its reference would not be exclusively confined by a definite description. Thus, Acquaintance Theory denies any possibility of our having a singular thought about the relevant object while using a descriptive name. This position, which may be characterized by the slogan “no acquaintance, no singular thought,” seems to have been the most widely accepted view in the philosophy of language⁵.

On the other hand, Semantic Instrumentalism, as Jeshion specified it, stands out by its rather liberal attitude toward the question at hand. According to this position, we can have a singular thought about the referent of a descriptive name simply by using the very name, given some other minor conditions are satisfied. Indeed, it even claims that we can have a singular thought about an object that has not yet come into existence, on the condition that we can construct and use a descriptive name whose reference is fixed by a definite description that is uniquely satisfied by the object in question. Thus, if Semantic Instrumentalism is correct, we can have a singular thought about any object from the past, present, or future, as long as we can construct and use an appropriate descriptive name, or, as Jeshion defined it, “descriptively introduced referential terms” (DIRTs)⁶.

2.2. *Singularity of thoughts*

According to Semantic Instrumentalism, we can have a singular thought simply by using a descriptive name, which means that in using the name, we can have a type of thought that cannot be obtained by thinking of the referent as the unique satisfier of any description. Given that the reference of a descriptive name is exclusively fixed by a

role in our grasp of a singular thought.

³ Cf. Jeshion (2010).

⁴ Cf. Jeshion (2010), p. 109.

⁵ For example, Bach (2008), Evans (1985b), McCulloch (1985), Recanati (2010), etc.

⁶ DIRTs are a group of linguistic devices whose references are exclusively fixed by a definite description (cf. Jeshion (2010), p. 105). Instead of proper descriptive names, those terms include Kaplan's so-called “dthat” expressions (cf. Kaplan (1989a), especially p. 521) and deferred pronouns or demonstratives.

definite description, this idea is rather problematic to support and has actually raised some powerful arguments contradicting it. For example, Evans (1985b) maintains that the sentence “Julius is F”—formed by using a descriptive name “Julius” whose reference is fixed by the definite description “the inventor of the zip”—has exactly the same content as the sentence “The inventor of the zip is F.” In other words, according to Evans, we come to grasp exactly the same *descriptive* thought when we understand these two sentences. However, if Semantic Instrumentalism is right, our introduction, and use of a descriptive name of itself should enable us to have a singular thought about its referent. Evans criticizes this by saying that it is implausible that we can create a completely new type of thought just by “the stroke of a pen.”⁷ However, I think that the most serious problem with Semantic Instrumentalism lies in the fact that it cannot give us a tenable grouping of singular thoughts in the first place. If we are to classify a group of thoughts into a unified category, that categorization should be related to some distinctive character of our behavior and psychology, which can be explained by the underlying thoughts of that category. The problem is that there is no distinctive character of our behavior and psychology which is observed in *all* the cases of our use of a descriptive name, that is, in *all* the cases of our having a “singular thought” as Semantic Instrumentalism calls it. For example, my behavior and psychology when using “Sunny Sides” in the situation described above, will be quite different from when I use the name after I actually open the book-shop. It is essential that we acknowledge this difference if we are to correctly understand my use of the name “Sunny Sides” in each situation. The concept of thought is primarily connected to this kind of difference, which shows how we understand the term in question. However, we will end up cutting off that connection if we conclude, according to Semantic Instrumentalism, that I have exactly the same “singular thought” in both situations. As far as I can see, our idea of singular thought as a thought about a particular object entails that an object does, or did, exist. This, in turn, seems to suggest that singularity of thought, as we understand it, depends on there being a substantial connection between the subject and the object that can be manifested as a change in the subject’s state of knowledge according to the object’s state of affairs. Of course, we cannot expect any non-existent object to have such a causal effect on the subject’s state of knowledge. This clearly has something to do with the difference of my behavior and psychology observed in the two cases of my use of “Sunny Sides” mentioned above. Given all this, our grasp of singular thoughts, or thoughts about a particular object, cannot simply depend on our action or manipulation, such as our use of descriptive names. Rather, it must be a matter of that substantial connection between the subject and the object, which is manifested as a systematic change in the subject’s state of knowledge, and behavior and psychology, based on the object’s state of affairs.

Thus, if this kind of connection always requires the subject to have an acquaintance relation to the object in question, we will be forced to conclude that our use of a descriptive name can never involve our grasp of singular thoughts about the referent of that name. In my opinion, however, the connection cannot be constituted by the acquaintance relation itself. Certainly, if the acquaintance relation does hold between the subject and the object, there must be, or have been, an object to be thought about anyway. In addition, if the subject himself is currently perceiving the object, or remembering his own experience of having perceived it, we may be allowed to say that the subject is connected to the object in the manner required for having a singular thought about it. However, as Jeshion argued, when the subject is acquainted with the object via a communication chain, that is, on the basis of some other person’s experience of having perceived the object, it is difficult to explain how the subject can have a singular thought (if any) about the object, given that our experience can never be transferred to another person⁸. An acquaintance relation that extends between the subject and the

⁷ Cf. Evans (1985b), pp. 200-202.

⁸ Cf. Jeshion (2010), p. 110.

object as long as someone in the relevant community has perceived the object and identified it as a unique bearer of the name in question, seems to give us a merely partial explanation of how to grasp a singular thought about that object.

If such a connection actually extends between the subject and the object, we can expect the subject's state of knowledge to change according to the object's state of affairs. From time to time, such a connection is sustained because of a communication chain between the subject and the object, even if the subject has not perceived the object himself. For example, we can gain information about the words and actions of a person we have never met through communicating with others. Based on that knowledge, we often form a certain opinion about the person, which will naturally change as we acquire more information about him. This observation suggests that what constitutes a proper connection and makes our thought a singular thought about a particular object, is *not* any perceptual experience of that object by someone in the relevant community, *nor* any acquaintance relation which originates from that perceptual experience for that matter. Rather, it is information that is often received from the object and transferred to the subject through an acquaintance relation that constitutes the required substantial connection between the subject and the object⁹. This type of information, unlike perceptual experience, can certainly be transferred to the subject who has never perceived the object through a communication chain as mentioned above. It is quite remarkable to see the power of that substantial connection, of affecting the subject's state of knowledge, ultimately consisting in this type of information that is transferred to the subject and sometimes updated. Moreover, this information is not necessarily obtained by someone's perceptual experience of the object in question, but can be derived from the works created by the object, or historical material that tells us about the object's words or actions. If all these considerations are correct, we can say that Acquaintance Theory has identified the means to receive and transmit this type of information, that is, a perceptual experience of the object in question and an acquaintance relation that originates from such an experience. However, as I see it, to have a singular thought about an object is to acquire information from the very object itself, and that is quite different from having an acquaintance relation to the object in question through which we can sometimes receive or transmit information.

3. Case Studies

3.1. *Recapitulation and ensuing deductions*

Once again, what is essential to having a singular thought about a particular object is, in my opinion, a precise connection to the object in question. Moreover, if I am right in my assumption that this kind of connection does not depend on having an acquaintance relation to the relevant object, there seems to be no obstacle for sustaining such a connection between the user of a descriptive name and the name's referent as long as the referent really exists, or existed. In this section, I would like to examine some real cases of our use of a descriptive name, and clarify in more detail how such an exercise can involve our grasp of a singular thought of the relevant object.

3.2. *Two cases considered*

The first case we shall deal with is one where the descriptive name has, as its referent, an object that actually exists, or existed. However, even an examination of such a case cannot conclude that all such cases of our use of a descriptive name involve our grasp of a singular thought about its referent. For example, let us now introduce a descriptive name "Conan" by means of fixing its reference through the definite description "the last Naumann's elephant which lived in Hokkaido." This descriptive name clearly satisfies the condition that it has, as its referent, an object that must have really existed in Hokkaido. However, given the arguments in the previous section, it is difficult to contend

⁹ Cf. Evans (1982), (1985a) and footnote 2.

that we can arrive at a singular thought about Conan in using “Conan,” because we do not have any information, which can claim to have received from that particular Naumann’s elephant. Thus, we are not connected to Conan in the manner required for having a singular thought about it. This means that our state of knowledge, and our behavior and psychology cannot be affected by Conan’s state of affairs. At most, we can conclude that, in using “Conan,” we have a general thought, which involves a general concept expressed by the name’s reference-fixing description. In this type of case, where a descriptive name is introduced in an entirely ad-hoc manner, we can naturally conclude that in using a descriptive name we can never arrive at a singular thought about its referent. Indeed, some influential discussions about the relation between our use of descriptive names and singular thoughts have focused on this type of ad-hoc descriptive names¹⁰.

However, there is another type of case where the user of a descriptive name has a more substantial knowledge about the referent. One example is the use of the descriptive name “Unabomber” before its referent was identified. This descriptive name was introduced to refer to the person responsible for the serial bombings that occurred between the late 1970s and the 1990s in the United States of America. The Unabomber, later identified as Theodore Kaczynski, repeated the offense 16 times, targeting airline companies and universities, until his arrest in 1996. He even claimed responsibility for the bombings through a leading newspaper. Naturally, people who lived in the USA at that time must have used the name “Unabomber” while discussing his character, actions, and motives, even before he was actually identified. It is not too difficult to believe that some of them might have even refrained from visiting airports or universities because of such conversations. As far as I can see, we essentially behave the same way with regard to people who have already been identified in our language-speaking community, such as Abraham Lincoln or Adolf Hitler. We discuss their personalities or influences, express various emotions toward their behavior, and decide to adopt or avoid a certain action based on such discussions or emotions. Of course, the point here is that in both cases the subject’s behavior and psychology seem to be significantly affected by information about a certain object, which the subject himself has never perceived. Not only in the latter case where an object has already been identified as the bearer of the name at hand, but also in the former case where such an identification is yet to be made, the subject seems to receive information from the relevant object and, therefore, is in a position to have a singular thought about it¹¹.

3.3. *Non ad-hoc or “information-based” use of descriptive names*

In using a descriptive name, if we compare the way “Unabomber” was introduced and used with the way “Conan” was, we will observe a distinctive feature, which seems to play a crucial role in our grasp of a singular thought about the relevant object. Mainly, our positive involvement in collecting and communicating information derived from the very object by using the exact name. “Unabomber” was first introduced into the relevant community against a very different background from the case of “Conan,” in that, from the outset, the name “Unabomber” was linked with information derived from its referent since the police must have obtained some information from the Unabomber during their investigation. Indeed, it was exactly because such information had been obtained that they introduced the descriptive name “Unabomber.” In other words, “Unabomber,” unlike “Conan,” was not introduced into the relevant community in an ad-hoc manner. Rather, it was introduced in connection with some information from its referent in the first place with the intention of being used to collect and communicate relevant information that would be accumulated and updated as time went by. When the name became common knowledge in the community, information from the Unabomber also was transferred by

¹⁰ “Julius” and “Newman 1” mentioned in footnote 1 are typical examples of ad-hoc descriptive names.

¹¹ As was discussed in the previous section, identification of the object in question, or an acquaintance relation between the subject and the object based on such an identification, is different from the subject’s possession of information from the very object.

using the name more widely than ever before. This strikingly contrasts with the case of “Conan,” whose use was a completely personal matter and did not amount to any collection and communication of information from its referent. In short, our introduction and use of “Conan” had nothing to do with our collecting and communicating information from the relevant object, which should be characterized as an essentially linguistic and social activity. On the other hand, the introduction and use of “Unabomber” was indeed related to that kind of activity, and the fact that it actually provided people with the right kind of information, was ultimately responsible for their grasp of a singular thought about the Unabomber. Of course, information that was communicated using “Unabomber” may have included those that did not originate from the Unabomber at all. If no information from him had been included, then, while using the descriptive name, the subject could have grasped no singular thought about the Unabomber. In reality, however, more and more information from the Unabomber came to be connected with “Unabomber” as he repeated offenses. This is crucial for people to have a singular thought about him, given that their possession of such information plays an essential role in their grasp of such a singular thought. The subject who did obtain some information from the Unabomber must have been able to grasp a singular thought about him while using “Unabomber,” even if he connected other information that did not originate from the Unabomber with “Unabomber”. If the subject found some incorrect information in connection to “Unabomber,” he would have immediately discarded it. This suggests that it was only information from the Unabomber that could affect the subject’s behavior and psychology. Thus, only the Unabomber could be connected to the subject in a way that characterized the grasp of a singular thought about a particular object.

4. Concluding Remarks

If all these considerations are on the right track, it follows that our use of descriptive names, which is meant to be a linguistic and social activity like the example given above, can actually widen the range of objects of which we can have a singular thought. If that is the case, it follows that descriptive names are uniquely important for our having a singular thought about a variety of objects that exist or existed throughout the world. In fact, the following passage suggests that a more or less similar view may underlie Semantic Instrumentalism.

“...The notion that a referent can be carried by a name from early past to present suggests that the language itself carries meanings, and thus that we can *acquire* meanings through the instrument of language. This frees us from the constraints of subjectivist semantics and provides the opportunity for an *instrumental* use of language to broaden the realm of what can be expressed and to broaden the horizons of thought itself. / On my view, our connection with a linguistic community in which names and other meaning-bearing elements are passed down to us enables us to entertain thoughts *through the language* that would not otherwise be accessible to us. Call this *the Instrumental Thesis*. / ...It urges us to see language, and in particular semantics, as more autonomous, more independent of the thought of individual users, and to see our powers of apprehension as less autonomous and more dependent on our vocabulary.”¹²

Of course, Semantic Instrumentalism emphasizes the point that our use of a descriptive name of itself allows us to grasp a singular thought about its referent. However, the passage cited above clearly requires us to be connected to some or other language-speaking community in order to grasp such a thought. The problem, in my view, is that Semantic Instrumentalism has interpreted this connection as having nothing to do with our linguistic and social activity discussed above, which is collecting and communicating information from the relevant object. If my arguments so far are correct, we are forced to

¹² Kaplan (1989b), pp. 603-604.

conclude that, even in the case of an ordinary proper name from which the passage starts its consideration, our receiving and holding information from the referent is what is essential for us to have a singular thought about it. This information is often transferred to us through the linguistic and social activity carried out by using the very name. Thus, Semantic Instrumentalism makes a good point in stating that our use of descriptive names against a background of some language-speaking community would enable us to have a singular thought that would otherwise not be accessible to us. However, it would be a grave error to conclude that our use of descriptive names *quite generally* enables us to have a singular thought about its referent, regardless of whether the use is related to any linguistic and social activity.

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