

Singular thoughts and singular propositions

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Abstract A singular thought about an object *o* is one that is directly about *o* in a characteristic way—grasp of that thought requires having some special epistemic relation to the object *o*, and the thought is ontologically dependent on *o*. One account of the nature of singular thought exploits a Russellian Structured Account of Propositions, according to which contents are represented by means of structured *n*-tuples of objects, properties, and functions. A proposition is singular, according to this framework, if and only if it contains an object as a constituent. One advantage of the framework of Russellian Structured propositions is that it promises to provide a metaphysical basis for the notion of a singular thought about an object, grounding it in terms of constituency. In this paper, we argue that the attempt to ground the peculiar features of singular thoughts in terms of metaphysical constituency fails, and draw some consequences of our discussion for other debates.

Keywords Singular thought · Propositions · Vagueness

A number of debates in the philosophy of language, mind, and metaphysics turn crucially on the notion of a singular thought. Intuitively, a singular thought about an object *o* is one that is *directly about* *o* in a characteristic way—grasp of that thought requires having some special epistemic relation to the object *o*, and the thought is ontologically dependent on *o*. One very common account of the nature of singular thought assumes what we shall call a Russellian Structured Account of Propositions, according to which contents are represented by means of structured *n*-tuples of

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objects, properties, and functions. A proposition is singular, according to this framework, if and only if it contains an object as a constituent.¹ One decided advantage of the framework of Russellian Structured propositions is that it promises to provide a metaphysical basis for the notion of a singular thought about an object, grounding it in terms of *constituency*.

Most philosophers who accept the Russellian Structured account of propositions take ordinary proper names to be “directly referential terms”, which are terms that “refer directly without the mediation of a Fregean *Sinn* as meaning.” (Kaplan 1989a, p. 483). Sentences that contain such names express, relative to a context, singular propositions. As Jeffrey King (2007, pp. 6–7) writes, summarizing such work:

Nathan Salmon (1986), Scott Soames (1987), David Kaplan (1989), and others, all influenced by the seminal work of Saul Kripke (1972), have articulated views according to which certain linguistic expressions (perhaps taken relative to contexts) contribute individuals to propositions. In the wake of this work, it is widely held that proper names, indexicals (‘I’, ‘here’, ‘now’, etc.) and demonstrative pronouns (taken relative to contexts) contribute the individuals they designate (in those contexts) to the propositions expressed (in those contexts) by the sentences in which they occur. Such expressions are generally called devices of direct reference, the term ‘direct’ alluding to the fact that these expressions don’t contribute some entity to a proposition that at a circumstance of evaluation determines an individual distinct from the entity. Rather, the individual itself gets contributed to the proposition.

That is, according to a widely held view of the semantic content of sentences, sentences containing “directly referential terms” express, relative to a context, propositions that contain the referents (relative to those contexts) of the directly referential terms as constituents. On such a framework, a singular proposition is a proposition that is characterized in the first instance as the semantic content (relative to a context) of a sentence containing a directly referential term (Kaplan 1989a, *Ibid.*). A proposition is a singular proposition about an object *o*, if and only if it contains *o* as a constituent. Assuming no failure of propositional expression, a sentence (relative to a context) expresses a singular proposition about an object *o* if and only if it contains a directly referential term designating *o*.

One merit of this general framework is that it promises to ground the notion of a singular thought via an attractively appealing metaphysical picture. For example, Nathan Salmon (2007, p. 60), a preeminent contemporary advocate of the Russellian proposition picture, characterizes the relevant sense of direct aboutness as follows:

Where *p* is a proposition and *x* is either an individual or another proposition, a Russellian notion of direct aboutness is definable as follows:

p is directly about *x* = *df* *x* is a proper constituent of *p*.

¹ “A singular proposition is a proposition that is about one of its own components by virtue of containing it.” (Salmon 2005, p. 419).

If a singular thought is a singular proposition in the Russellian sense, the special properties of singular thought are explicable. Suppose that grasp of a proposition requires having a special epistemic relation to all of its proper constituents. Then grasp of a singular Russellian proposition that has *o* as a constituent requires having a special epistemic relation to *o*, because grasp of a proposition requires having a special epistemic relation to all its proper constituents, and *o* is among its proper constituents.

In this paper we will argue that the Russellian notion of a singular proposition is prohibitively restrictive. There are sentences that express propositions that have the properties that only singular propositions are supposed to have, yet do not express singular propositions according to the Russellian framework. In short, there are propositions that are singular thoughts, because they are directly about objects in the relevant senses, yet are not Russellian singular propositions, even on the Russellian view of content.

That there are propositions that are directly about objects in the relevant senses, yet cannot be construed as Russellian singular propositions, does not refute the theory of Russellian singular propositions. It is open to Russellian to hold that there are propositions that are not singular in his sense, but nevertheless have the requisite epistemic and metaphysical properties of singular propositions. However, it does undermine the attempt to capture the special epistemic properties of singular thought in terms of the Russellian apparatus of proper constituency. Since we believe that many philosophers are attracted to the Russellian framework because it promises to provide a metaphysical account of the special epistemic properties of singular thought, the results of this paper undermine one of the intuitive motivations for the Russellian framework.

However, our aim is not simply to undermine a motivation for the Russellian framework. The assumption that a proposition is directly about objects in the relevant senses only if it contains an object as a constituent is an assumption that makes a difference in a number of different domains. Here is why. One standard objection to an analysis of a notion is that the analysis renders the notion unacceptably subjective. One way of making this kind of objection is by showing that, according to the analysis, propositions that are intuitively not directly about (say) persons are misclassified as being directly about persons. This problematic is present across a wide variety of debates in philosophy. The point that a proposition can be directly about an object in the relevant senses without containing that object as a constituent is relevant in such debates. After establishing that, even on a view that treats contents as Russellian structured propositions, a proposition can be directly about an object in all relevant senses without containing it as a constituent, we illustrate the consequence of the point for a representative debate, one concerning vagueness. We conclude the paper with a brief consideration of whether one can grasp a proposition that contains an object as a constituent without thereby having a singular thought about that object.

1. Our task in this paper is to show that a certain theoretical conception of singular proposition is excessively restrictive, and fails to capture the roles the notion of a singular thought is supposed to play. For this purpose, we need some account of these roles. We can then use our discussion to evaluate the Russellian

structured account. We will focus on two such roles. First, some propositions have the property that grasp of those propositions requires standing in a special epistemic relation to some object. Secondly, some propositions have the property of being metaphysically dependent upon the existence of some object. We take these two properties to characterize the notion of a singular thought.

The notion of a singular thought has an intuitive basis. For example, suppose I am pointing at an apple, and I utter the sentence “This is red”. The thought I express is intuitively a singular thought about the apple, since grasp of what I said requires having some special epistemic relation to that apple—in vague and somewhat misleading parlance, one must *know which* apple is being demonstrated in order to understand what was said.² In contrast, grasp of what is expressed by “the first person born in New York City in the year 2000 was a boy” does not require bearing this special epistemic relation to the denotation of the description “the first person born in New York City in the year 2000” (though it does require bearing it to New York City). Finally, the sentence “everything is self-identical” does not express a singular thought about any object, because grasp of what the sentence expresses does not require having any special epistemic relation with particular objects.

According to Bertrand Russell, grasp of any proposition required bearing a special epistemic relation to all of its constituents. Following Russell, we will say that when these epistemic conditions are met, the individual is *acquainted* with the relevant entities. Russell also held that some propositions contained objects as constituents. It follows that grasp of these propositions requires bearing the acquaintance relation to these objects. Those contents grasp of which required acquaintance with objects are what we call singular thoughts about those objects.

Russell himself was, of course, notoriously restrictive about the types of objects one could be acquainted with, limiting its scope to universals, sense data, and (perhaps) ourselves. Russell’s initial account of content was his theory of *denoting concepts*. Roughly, according to Russell, a concept ϕ occurring in the subject position of a subject-predicate proposition denotes an object (possibly plural) θ when any proposition containing ϕ in its subject position is not about what occurs in its subject position, but is rather about θ (Russell 1903, Sect. 56). Expressions that express denoting concepts are contrasted with expressions that mention entities—which figure in sentences that express propositions that are directly about particular individuals. Shortly after formulating his theory of denoting concepts, Russell replaced it with the theory of descriptions. In the subsequent theory of content, Russell distinguished quantificational expressions, such as “An F”, “every F”, and “the F”, from *logically proper names*. Russell held that there was a tight connection between logically proper names and what we would now call singular propositions. As John McDowell (1986, p. 228) notes, “...Russell presupposes an interlocking conception of genuinely referring expressions (logically proper names) and singular propositions; logically proper names combine with predicates to express propositions that would not be available to be expressed at all if the objects referred to did not exist.”

² Though see Boer and Lycan (1986) for criticism of the view that ordinary attributions of knowing-wh are necessary and sufficient singular thought.

Russell was pushed to his theory of acquaintance by a number of competing pressures.³ Russell held that if I can intelligibly ask the question “Does α exist?”, then it must be the case that ‘ α ’ is not functioning as a logically proper name. For Russell, if we have genuine acquaintance with an object or a universal, there can be no doubt about its existence. We will not here explore the reasons for his view (though see Ian Proops (forthcoming)). But since, for almost any name in ordinary language, the relevant question can be sensibly posed, these considerations entail that most of the names used in natural language function as disguised definite descriptions. Given the connection between logically proper names and singular propositions, it would follow straightway that ordinary speakers rarely manage to express singular propositions.

Russell’s extremely restrictive view of acquaintance has won few converts. However, many have been taken by the idea that an individual will have to be acquainted with an object in some way in order to entertain a singular thought about it (though not all have used the term “acquaintance” for the epistemic relation in question). In fact, there is a near consensus in the literature that some such epistemic constraint must be in place in order for an individual to apprehend a singular thought.⁴ This is not to say that theorists are in much agreement over the precise nature of this acquaintance relation; in fact, much of the debate over singular thought in the last 40 years has centered on the question of how we should understand the requirements the acquaintance relation imposes. Some think that in almost every case, acquisition of a name is sufficient (Kaplan 1989b, p. 605). Others think a more elaborate epistemological account is required (Evans 1982). It is not our aim to attempt to adjudicate this debate here. The important point is simply that there are some contents grasp of which requires some special epistemic connection to an object. Perhaps the principle role of the notion of a singular thought is that it involves this epistemic connection to an object.

The other major role of singular thoughts is metaphysical in nature. Singular thoughts are partially determined by the objects such thoughts are about; that is, if P is a singular thought about a , and Q is a singular thought about b , and a is not identical to b , then P and Q are distinct singular thoughts. Let’s call this the *individuation dependence* of singular thoughts. It’s clear that Burge (1977, p. 48) has something like the individuation dependence of singular thoughts in mind when he speaks of singular thoughts as not being purely conceptualized, but needing to be “filled-in” or “completed” by the objects these thoughts are about (see also Stalnaker (1988, p. 160); (2010)).

Since the pioneering work of Arthur Prior and Kit Fine (Prior and Fine (1977); cf. Adams (1981)) many have held that singular thoughts exhibit another kind of metaphysical dependency apart from their individuation dependence. In particular, many have adopted the thesis that singular thoughts are metaphysically dependent on the objects they are about in a way non-singular thoughts are not.⁵ Different

³ See Evans (1982, p. 44) and Potter (2008), p. 55) for more discussion.

⁴ Although this consensus is certainly not universal; see e.g. Jeshion (2002).

⁵ Again, this consensus is not universal. Alvin Plantinga (see Plantinga (1983)) and Thomas Crisp (see Crisp (2003)) have rejected the object dependence of singular propositions. In each case, the rejection of

theorists have used slightly different theoretical frameworks to characterize the notion of object dependence. Perhaps the most common view is to hold that singular thoughts only exist in worlds in which the objects they are about exist (a thesis sometimes called ‘existentialism’ in the literature on modal metaphysics). Singular thoughts about contingently existing objects would thus also only contingently exist. Other theorists have adopted the weaker thesis that singular thoughts cannot be entertained or thought in worlds where the objects they are about do not exist. What is common to each of these accounts is the claim that singular thoughts cannot serve as contents in situations in which the objects the thoughts are about do not exist. Let’s call this the *modal dependence* of singular thoughts.

These properties characterize the primary roles singular thoughts are supposed to play. Some thoughts have the property that grasp of them requires acquaintance with specific objects; it is also widely held that these thoughts also exhibit metaphysical dependence on those objects. The notion of a singular thought is intended to capture these theoretical roles. Any specific theory of what makes a content a singular thought about an object should therefore capture these roles.

2. There are two different versions of structured proposition theory, and each yields a notion of singular thought. According to the first kind, the Fregean theory, propositions are structured, and contain as constituents something corresponding to Fregean senses—either ways of thinking of objects, or surrogate intensional entities that pick out objects relative to various circumstances (such as times and worlds). On this view, propositions only contain ways of thinking or similar surrogate entities as constituents. According to the second, Russellian view, propositions are structured, and can contain objects, rather than ways of thinking of them, as constituents.

On both views, it is possible to define a notion of singular proposition. For example, on a Fregean view, a singular proposition would be one that contained as a constituent what John McDowell (1984) has called a “de re sense”. These propositions would satisfy both the modal and individual dependence conditions, since de re senses only exist, or, alternatively, are only capable of being entertained, when the objects they denote exist. Furthermore, grasp of a proposition containing a de re way of thinking of an object would only be possible if one had acquaintance with that object.

On the contemporary Russellian view, propositions also have constituents, but they are not ways of thinking. The notion of a constituent of a proposition is often taken as primitive in discussions of Russellian theories (e.g. Salmon 2007, p. 60). Here is the basic idea. A proposition has, as constituents, properties, functions, and perhaps objects. Perhaps some of these properties are themselves complex, and their analysis reveals that they too have constituents. But a constituent of a constituent of a proposition is not automatically thereby a constituent of that proposition. The

Footnote 5 continued

object dependence is motivated by puzzles concerning the truth-value of singular thoughts at worlds or times in which the objects these singular propositions are about do not exist. Perhaps a “truth in/truth at” distinction akin to the one suggested by Adams (1981), Fine (1985), and more recently developed by Jeff King (King (2007), can be used to resolve the puzzles that motivate Plantinga and Crisp to reject the object dependence of singular thought.

general rule is as follows: a constituent of a propositional constituent of a complex proposition is a constituent of the complex proposition. So, if the proposition *p* contains *F* as a constituent, then the complex proposition that *p* or *q* also contains *F* as a constituent. However, an element in the analysis of a property or relation occurring as a constituent of a proposition is not a constituent of that proposition. For example, as Jeffrey King (2007, Chapter 7) argues, even if knowledge is justified true belief, the proposition expressed by ‘John knows that snow is white’ does not contain the property of being justified as a constituent. With this background to the primitive notion of constituency, a singular proposition can be defined as a proposition that contains an object as a constituent.⁶ On the Russellian view, grasp of a proposition requires acquaintance with all of its constituents. It follows that grasp of a singular proposition requires acquaintance with the object or objects contained in the proposition. It is this second Russellian view that it is the focus of this paper.

It is not hard to see why philosophers have been attracted to the structured Russellian account of singular propositions. The structured Russellian account is able to characterize perspicuously the difference between singular thoughts and non-singular ones. On the structured account, singular thoughts are singular propositions. They are distinguished by being composed of different sorts of entities than other propositions; one can tell whether a proposition is singular just by looking at whether it contains an individual as a constituent. Structured Russellian propositions, in this sense, wear their singularity on their sleeves. Some theorists have been clear that it is precisely this metaphysical vividness which makes the structured account of singular propositions so appealing. As its principle architect writes:

If I may wax metaphysical in order to fix an image, let us think of the vehicles of evaluation –the what-is-said in a given context – as propositions. Don’t think of propositions as sets of possible worlds, but rather as structured entities looking something like the sentences which express them. For each occurrence of a singular term in a sentence there will be a corresponding constituent in the proposition expressed...in the case of a singular term which is directly referential, the constituent of the proposition is just the object itself.⁷ (Kaplan 1989a, p. 494)

The structured account is also able to explain the modal and individuation dependence of singular thoughts in an extremely straightforward and natural manner. Since the individuals themselves are constituents of singular propositions on the structured Russellian framework, it is very natural to hold that the proposition itself would not exist—or, at least would not be able to be thought or entertained—in worlds in which the object the proposition is about does not exist. In fact, it is hard to see how modal dependence and individuation dependence could fail to hold

⁶ For example, on the theory in King (2007, Chapter 2), it would be a proposition in which an object occurred as one of the relata of the propositional relation of that proposition.

⁷ Note that despite Kaplan’s attraction to a structured approach to propositions, he gives his formal semantics in the standard possible world framework and explicitly states that the structured approach is not a part of his official theory (p. 496).

on the structured Russellian account. The ability to account so easily for these roles is a strong mark in favor of the structured Russellian account.

A final advantage of the structured Russellian account is that it offers a promising account of what the direct aboutness of singular thoughts consists in. We have repeatedly spoken of singular thoughts as those thoughts that are directly about particular individuals. It would be nice if we could explain what this direct aboutness amounted to, via some story which could ground these claims of direct aboutness in terms of something more fundamental. According to the structured Russellian account, a singular proposition is a proposition directly about a particular object, *in virtue of containing that object as a constituent*. As the quote from Salmon with which we began the paper illustrates, claims concerning the direct aboutness of singular propositions can be analyzed in terms of constituency, and that is a *prima facie* virtue of the structured Russellian account. So it seems that Russellian singular propositions are particularly well-suited to ground the distinction between contents grasp of which requires some kind of special epistemic connection with some object, and contents grasp of which does not require any such epistemic connection, as well as the metaphysical features of such contents. In short, it seems that Russellian singular propositions provide an excellent model for singular thought.

3. Despite the advantages of the structured Russellian account of singular proposition, it faces difficulties as an account of singular thought. The main difficulty is this. According to the advocate of Russellian structured singular propositions who wishes to explain the category of singular thought, singular thoughts are ones that contain objects as constituents. But it is easy to describe Russellian semantic theories with the following properties: they assign Russellian propositions to sentences relative to contexts, the propositions do not contain objects as constituents, yet the sentences are such that grasp of the contents they express, relative to that context, requires acquaintance with certain objects. The existence and plausibility of such mappings between sentences and propositions reveals that it is false that the particular characteristics of singular thoughts are only in play when that proposition contains an object as a proper constituent.

Consider the sentence “John is a philosopher.” According to the structured Russellian account, this sentence expresses a proposition that is about John in the relevant senses only if John is a constituent of the proposition expressed. But this result will be achieved only if one makes unnecessarily strong commitments regarding the semantic contribution of proper name “John” to the proposition expressed. Suppose, instead of treating ordinary proper names as directly referential expressions, we followed Montague semantics and treated the proper name “John” as a *generalized quantifier*, a function from properties to truth-values—namely that function that takes a property to the true if and only if it is a property John has (see Montague (1973)). The structured Russellian proposition that would then be expressed by “John is a philosopher” would then not contain John as a constituent. Rather, it would contain the function of type $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$ that is the semantic value of “John”, and the property of being a philosopher. So if we treat “John” as denoting a function of type $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$, then “John is a philosopher” does not express a singular proposition, given the structured account. Yet intuitively, even if “John” is

a generalized quantifier, grasp of what is said by an occurrence of “John is a philosopher” requires having acquaintance with John; similarly, the content of the name “John” is metaphysically depended on John. But if “John” is a generalized quantifier, then occurrences of “John is a philosopher” do not express Russellian singular propositions. If so, then there are contents that have all the hallmarks of singular thoughts, but are not Russellian singular propositions.

There is no bar at all to the thesis that grasp of propositions that do not contain objects as constituents may nevertheless require acquaintance with objects. On the Montagovian view we have just considered, names semantically express functions from objects to properties to truth-values. So in the sentence “John is a philosopher” the name contributes a function of type $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$, and so is clearly not directly referential. However, names are still object-dependent on the Montagovian framework, because the proposition expressed by “John is a philosopher” has the meaning it does partially because of John (not because of some individual concept which happen to denote John), and would not exist—or be possible of being expressed or entertained—in worlds John does not exist. Furthermore, grasp of the Montagovian denotation of “John” seems to require some sort of epistemic acquaintance with John. Thus such a Montagovian view allows for object dependence without direct reference.

Here is an analogy. Consider the Fregean framework with *de re* senses. A Fregean singular proposition is one that contains a *de re* sense of an object—a way of thinking of that object that could not be entertained, and perhaps could not exist, unless that object exists. On this framework, there are propositions that play the epistemic and metaphysical roles singular thoughts are supposed to play. However, there are no directly referential terms in the language. Each term contributes only a way of thinking to the proposition expressed by a use of a sentence containing it. So the Fregean view, with *de re* senses, provides a clear model of entities that serve the functional role of singular thoughts, but without direct reference in the sense of Russell’s logically proper names.

One might argue that the Montagovian treatment of proper names should be understood in a way that entails that sentences containing proper names express (relative to a context) singular propositions. A standard way to represent the Montagovian treatment of a name like “John” in Montague’s IL (Intensional Logic) is as $\lambda F(F(j))$ (Dowty et al. 1981, p. 193). If we think that the structure of the Russellian proposition expressed by a sentence of English is revealed by its IL representation, then we would think that the proposition expressed by a sentence like “John runs” would contain an object as a proper constituent after all—just as a sub-constituent of the full contribution of the ordinary language proper name.

This response on behalf on the Russellian raises difficult issues about the relation between the English sentence, its IL representation, and the proposition semantically expressed by the English sentence. It is natural to read the IL representation of proper names as giving us an *analysis* of the function expressed by those proper names. But as we have seen in the previous section, it does not follow, from the fact that an analysis of a function expressed by an expression involves reference to an object, that that object is a constituent of the proposition expressed by a sentence containing that expression. As King (2007, p. 212) points out, even if one thinks that

knowledge is justified true belief, it is nevertheless natural to think that “know” contributes a simple verb denotation to the proposition expressed by sentences containing it. For a parallel reason, even if one thinks of the analysis of the generalized quantifier meaning of “John” to be of the form ‘ $\lambda F(F(j))$ ’, one would still think of the proposition expressed by a sentence containing “John” to contain only a simple generalized quantifier meaning.

In response to this argument, a defender of the structured Russellian account may maintain that we have simply begged the question against her view. A proponent of the structured Russellian account may hold that there is in fact an essential connection between the notion of a singular proposition and the idea that most ordinary proper names, indexicals, and the like are of type $\langle e \rangle$. As we have seen, contemporary advocates of the Russellian theory hold that such terms are *directly referential*. So perhaps, for the contemporary Russellian, the question of whether the sentence “John is a philosopher” expresses a singular thought should precisely turn on the theoretical decision of whether to treat the name “John” as a directly referential expression. As David Kaplan remarks (1989a, p. 571), “It all seemed of a piece to me: the singular proposition, the direct reference, and the rigid designation.” If the semantic value of “John” turned out to be a generalized quantifier, as the Montagovian would suggest, then the sentence “John is a philosopher” could not be used to express a singular thought about John. On this view, the Russellian theory makes exactly the right prediction—what is wrong is the intuition that grasp of the content of “John is a philosopher” requires acquaintance with John, if “John” is treated as denoting a generalized quantifier.

However, the decision to treat proper names as having generalized quantifier meanings is motivated by linguistic concerns, such as the desire to provide a uniform semantic category for noun phrases, and the need to explain the fact that one can conjoin names and uncontroversial generalized quantifiers, as in “Herman and some other philosopher gave talks”. It might be, on this basis, that the most elegant over-all linguistic theory treats names as denoting generalized quantifiers. But this does not change the obvious fact that grasp of the content of an utterance of a sentence like “Herman is a philosopher” requires having acquaintance with Herman. The moral is that it may be that grasp of some generalized quantifier meanings requires acquaintance with objects. It is not that we must reject the sort of linguistic considerations that have led Montagovians to treat ordinary proper names as generalized quantifiers.

Here is another example to make the point that a proposition can have all the properties of a singular thought, without being a Russellian singular proposition. Consider discussions of the rigidifying operator “actually”. Some Russellians have stressed that sentences containing the term “actually”, relative to contexts, express propositions about the actual world. That is, grasp of what is said by “The actual president of the United States is a Democrat” relative to a context c requires acquaintance with the world of the context c . We agree with this view. Suppose I utter something like “In actual fact, the president of the United States was a Democrat”. To grasp this proposition, one must have a *de re* attitude towards how things actually are—that is, the actual world-state. Had things been different, no one would have grasped the proposition that in actual fact, the president of the United

States was a Democrat. Had things been different, no one would have grasped this proposition, because no one would have had acquaintance with the actual world state.⁸

There is an additional argument for the conclusion that grasp of the meaning of an occurrence of “actual” requires acquaintance with the world state of the context. Consider the sentence-operator use of “actually”, where it appends to a possibly contingent truth α to yield a necessary truth. The semantics for the sentence-operator “actually” is as follows: ‘Actually α ’ is true relative to a context c and a world w if and only if α is true at c - w (where ‘ c - w ’ denotes the world of the context). So, ‘Possibly Actually α ’ is true at the actual world if and only if α is true at the actual world; similarly ‘Necessarily Actually α ’ is true at the actual world if and only if α is true at the actual world. The operator “actually” is therefore context-sensitive; what condition it places on the truth-conditions of larger sentences containing it depends upon the context in which it is uttered. What is it to grasp the content of such a sentence operator, relative to a context of use? Grasp of the content of an occurrence of “actually” relative to a context c requires grasp of the condition it expresses at c . But the condition it expresses is one that is sensitive to how things are at c - w , the world of the context of c . Furthermore, it seems that all there is to the content of “actually”, relative to a context c , is the condition it places on propositions. But the condition it places on propositions is that they are true at the actual world state. So it seems reasonable that grasp of the content of a use of “actually” in a context c requires grasp of the actual world state, since the condition it places on propositions involves grasp of how things are at the actual world state (the same kind of argument can be provided to show that grasp of the content of the adjective “actual”, relative to a context of use, requires acquaintance with the actual world-state).

Some advocates of Russellian singular propositions have been clear that grasp of the content of “actually”, relative to a context of use, requires de re acquaintance with the actual world. However, to accommodate this insight within the framework of acquaintance they advocate has required contortions. For example, Scott Soames, a prominent advocate of the framework, writes:

...the sentence *Actually Kaplan wrote “Demonstratives,”* used by anyone at the actual world, @, expresses the proposition that Kaplan wrote “Demonstratives” at @, while the same sentence used by a speaker at a world-state w expresses the proposition that Kaplan wrote “Demonstratives” at @. (Soames 2007)

So, Scott Soames takes the sentence-operator “actually” to have the same content as a direct reference theorist about complex demonstratives would give to the expression “at this world”, which according to her contains a directly referential expression naming the world of utterance.

⁸ Matters are obscured somewhat by the fact that “actual” and “actually” appear to have a purely rhetorical use as an intensifier—as in “I am actually a philosopher”. Used in this way, “actually” does not appear to contribute to semantic content. Soames (2007) argues that in fact “actually” is not ambiguous, and its role as a rigidifier explains its pragmatic role as an intensifier.

Soames is able to accommodate the fact that grasp of the content of a sentence containing “actually” expresses, relative to a context of use, a proposition grasp of which requires acquaintance with the world of the context, only by holding that uses of “actually” have complex semantic values—a proposition meaning and a world. But surely the obvious claim about the content of a use of “actually” is that it has a simple semantic value, namely *an operator meaning*. It is just that grasp of the operator meaning expressed by a use of “actually” requires acquaintance with the actual world. It is presumably because of Soames’s adherence to the view that for any proposition *p*, grasp of *p* requires acquaintance with *o* only if *p* is a Russellian singular proposition containing *o* that he is forced to re-express the content of an occurrence of “actually” as he does—as if it contained, as a sub-expression as it were, a directly referential term naming the world of the context. Recognition that grasp of some operator meanings requires acquaintance with objects frees us from this forced reinterpretation.

Here is a somewhat theoretical argument for the conclusion that an occurrence of “actually” contributes a simple operator meaning to the proposition expressed by occurrences of sentences containing it, rather than, as Soames would have it, a proposition meaning and a world. The following is an attractive theoretical principle:

Semantic category principle Syntactically and semantically simple expressions belonging to same semantic category should contribute the same kinds of semantic values to the propositions expressed by sentences containing them.

The word “actually” is *prima facie* both syntactically and semantically simple. It contains, for example, no evident syntactic sub-parts (the claim is even more obvious for the adjective “actual”). Furthermore, it belongs in the same syntactic and semantic category as other modal adverbs, such as “necessarily” and “possibly”. “Necessarily”, “possibly”, and “actually” are all ‘index shifters’—they shift the index they are given and evaluate the embedded proposition with respect to the potentially novel index. But “necessarily” and “possibly” contribute, to the content of sentences containing them, *simple operator meanings*. Therefore, by the Semantic Category Principle, a use of “actually” should have, relative to a context, a simple operator meaning as its content. If so, then Soames’s construal of the content of an occurrence of “actually” is incorrect.

One might reply by maintaining that there is a way to defend Soames’s construal of the content of an occurrence of “actually”, consistently with the Semantic Category Principle. If modals such as “necessarily” and “possibly” contribute, to the propositions expressed by sentences containing them, *quantifiers over worlds*, then it is plausible to maintain that a use of “actually” in a world *w* contributes something of the form “At *w*”. In short, if we reject intensionalism about modals, treating them extensionally as quantifiers over worlds, we can accommodate Soames’s treatment of “actually”.

A parallel point to the one we made at the end of our discussion about the Montagovian treatment of names is relevant here. It seems that whether or not we treat modal adverbs as expressing quantifiers over worlds or as intensional operators should be independent of the question of whether grasp of what is said by an

occurrence of “Actually p” requires acquaintance with the world of the context. Even if one is a thoroughgoing intensionalist about modality, one should still concede that grasp of the proposition expressed by an occurrence of “Actually p” requires acquaintance with the world of the context.

In this section, we have argued that even if we assign Russellian propositions as contents to sentences relative to a context, there are sentences that express propositions not containing objects as constituents, grasp of which nevertheless requires acquaintance with objects. This is because grasp of some non-singular contents (generalized quantifier meanings, operator meanings) requires grasp of objects. Furthermore, it is plausible to maintain that these generalized quantifier meanings and operator meanings do not exist unless the relevant objects exist. In short, being a Russellian singular proposition is not what grounds the distinction between contents that are epistemically and metaphysically dependent on objects, and contents that are epistemically and metaphysically independent of objects. Insofar as the contemporary Russellian account of singular propositions is motivated by the attempt to capture these features of singular thought in terms of metaphysical constituency, it fails. We now turn to some consequences of our discussion.

4. According to Delia Graff Fara, the source of vagueness lies in what she calls interest-relativity; a vague term is vague because it expresses an *interest-relative property* (see Fara 2000). An object possesses an interest-relative property partly in virtue of facts about the interests and purposes of some person or persons. For example, on one version of this view, a word like “heap” expresses a property like *being sufficiently heap-like for x’s purposes and interests*, for some contextually salient person (or persons) x. On another version of this view, a word like “heap” expresses a property like *being sufficiently heap-like for purposes and interests F*. Either view allows an account of changes in extension in a forced march Sorites, one that does not entail that a vague predicate changes the property it expresses as one progresses through the series.

The source of vagueness, on an interest-relative view, lies in the fact that an interest-relative property changes its extension over time. So, for example, the property of *being sufficiently heap-like for Bill’s purposes and interests* might have one extension at time t, and another extension at t’, depending upon what Bill’s purposes and interests are at that time. If Bill is progressing through a forced-march Sorites, then, according to the interest-relative, his purposes and interests will change as he makes successive judgments. The extension of the property *being sufficiently heap-like for Bill’s purposes and interests* will change accordingly. Alternatively, one might say that the interest-relative property expressed by “heap” is the property of *being sufficiently heap-like for purposes and interests F*. Then, as one progresses through a forced-march Sorites, the extension of “heap” would change as a function of changes in the world—as Fara now puts it (Fara 2008, footnote 4), the extension would change because what satisfies the constitutive interests of an interest-relative property changes.

Here are some problems with Fara’s views. It seems that an utterance of a sentence containing a vague term, like “Mount Everest is tall”, does not express a singular proposition either about a contextually salient person, or a contextually salient set of interests and goals. As Stanley (2003, 2005) has emphasized, it seems

like the proposition expressed by an utterance of “Mount Everest is a large mountain” can be true in a world in which there are no people or interests. That is, the modal-profile of the propositions expressed by sentences containing vague terms (that is, virtually any sentence) is not invariably sensitive to the existence of persons, communities, and interests. Furthermore, it seems that, for any person p or set of goals and interests F , there is someone who can grasp the proposition expressed by an utterance of “Mount Everest is tall” without having any beliefs about p or F . In short, Stanley’s point is that the proposition expressed by an utterance of “Mount Everest is a large mountain” does not meet either the metaphysical or epistemological desiderata for being a singular proposition either about a contextually salient person or a set of interests and goals.

In Fara (2008), she responds to these objections in detail. She concedes the metaphysical point that the proposition expressed by a sentence such as “Mount Everest is large mountain” could not, on her view, be true in a world with no people. However, she provides an error-theoretic explanation of why we think that what is said by an utterance of “Mount Everest is a large mountain” could have been true, even if there were no people.⁹ But she provides a different argument against the epistemic objection to her claim that grasp of the interest-relative proposition expressed (on her view) by a sentence like “Mount Everest is a large mountain” requires having beliefs about contextually salient persons or their interests. It is this response to Stanley’s epistemic objection to her view that is our focus here.

Fara makes two points, only the second of which is relevant here.¹⁰ Fara denies that, on her view, a sentence like “Mount Everest is tall” expresses a singular proposition about a contextually salient person (or their interests). The reason she gives is that the particular semantic analysis of gradable adjectives such as “tall” or “large” that she offers does not entail that the contextually salient person (or interests) is a constituent of the structured proposition expressed by sentences containing them. Rather, her analysis of gradable adjectives involves the postulation of an unpronounced positive morpheme in the syntax. This element denotes, relative to a context, what she calls a “high-type function”. The view is still interest-relative, because *which* high-type operator it denotes is a function of the contextually salient person, or their goals and interests. As she writes:

So what type of function or property must the positive morpheme be in order to achieve the [postulated semantic interpretation]? Given the order of composition dictated by the syntactic structure (SS) it will be a high-type function having measure functions for its domain and functions from comparison classes to properties of individuals for its range. On my interest-relative theory, it is a function f such that $f(G)(C)$ is a property

⁹ More specifically, she grants that what is said by an utterance of “Mount Everest is tall” has an interest-relative profile; it could only be true in a world in which there are people or interests. But she argues that in counterfactual evaluation, we keep certain facts fixed, which has the effect of rigidifying on the relevant interests. Then she argues that Stanley “exploits our correct judgment” about the counterfactual to make false conclusions about the what-is-said claims.

¹⁰ Her first point is that on an unstructured conception of content, there is no room to make the sort of objection involving epistemic involvement that Stanley levels against her interest-relative account of vagueness. We disagree with this claim, but discussion of it will take us too far afield of our topic.

that is true of a thing x just in case $G(x)$, x 's amount of G -ness, is significantly (to a) greater than the typical ("norm") amount of G -ness for a C . Which function precisely this is will depend on which of the various norms, and what agent a , is operative in the context.

When Stanley says (2003: 278) that according to this view the positive morpheme denotes the significantly-greater-than relation which requires as an implicit argument an agent with interests, and that the view therefore requires there to be interested agents as constituents of propositions expressed using gradable-adjective predications, he glosses over the pertinent aspect of my view. The positive morpheme does not denote a relational expression, but rather the high-type function just described.

So Fara's response is that her view does not entail that grasp of the structured Russellian proposition expressed by a sentence containing a vague gradable adjective requires acquaintance with a contextually salient person or their interests. The reason is that the contextually salient person (the "agent...operative in the context") determines the semantic value of a context-sensitive unpronounced morpheme in the syntax. But, relative to a context, the morpheme contributes only a high-type function to the proposition expressed, and not also an individual or their interests.

Suppose one introduced an operator, "Johnly", which meant the same as "According to John". Intuitively one might think that grasp of the operator meaning expressed by "Johnly" requires acquaintance with John. But Fara could argue, via the same reasoning she employs above, that grasp of the operator meaning expressed by "Johnly" does not require acquaintance with John, since an operator meaning is a kind of "high type function", and not an object. Fara's response is also akin to someone arguing that grasp of the semantic content of "actually", relative to a context of use, does not require acquaintance with the actual state of affairs, because "actually" has as its semantic content an operator meaning.

To think that grasp of a proposition that does not contain an object o does not require acquaintance with o is to think that what accounts for the characteristic features of singular thoughts is always metaphysical constituency. As we have seen in the previous section, this assumption is incorrect. The correct view is rather that grasp of some semantic values—be they operator meanings or other high-type functions—requires having acquaintance with some objects. When the content denoted by a given expression concerns some individual or object, then one may expect that grasp of that function requires acquaintance with that individual or object. The 'high-type function' denoted by Fara's unpronounced positive morpheme is a function of a salient agent or her interests. The meaning of the high-type function expressed by a use of a vague gradable adjective, like the meaning of "Johnly" or a use of "actually", concerns a particular individual—in the case of Fara, it concerns the interests of a salient agent. It is therefore natural to think that grasp of this function requires acquaintance with the salient agent or her interests.¹¹

¹¹ Another point worth emphasizing is that Fara's response to Stanley's objection involves the particular details of the syntax and semantics of gradable adjectives. It is far from clear that other vague expressions (that is, almost all expressions) have a similar syntax and semantics. Insofar as her response to Stanley's objection to her metaphysics is local to the details of gradable adjectives, it is therefore unsatisfying.

5. We have argued that, even when one thinks of contents as Russellian propositions, a proposition can be directly about an object, even though that proposition does not contain that object as a constituent. One might wonder whether it is also the case that a proposition can contain an object as a constituent, without being directly about that object. For example, are there propositions that contain objects as constituents, yet can be grasped without having any kind of special acquaintance with the object or objects that are constituents? A full evaluation of this question would require a distinct paper. But we can here briefly mention a consideration in favor of an affirmative answer.

The notion of constituency is taken as primitive in Russellian theories of propositions. As we have noted, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that constituency is a transitive relation. After all, if p is a proposition that contains an object as a constituent, one presumably would want it to be the case that truth-functional compounds containing p also contain that object as a constituent. For example, if the proposition that John runs contains John as a constituent, presumably so too does the proposition that it is not the case that John runs, or the proposition that either John runs or Sue walks. It is hard to see how to obtain these desirable results without imposing the demand that constituency is a transitive relation. As Nathan Salmon (2007, p. 60) writes:

It is assumed that the relevant notion of constituent-hood—for present purposes a primitive—is such that if x is a constituent of p , then *ipso facto* x is also a constituent (albeit not *ipso facto* an *immediate* constituent) of any proposition having p as a proper constituent. Since the proposition that Scott is Scottish is immediately directly about Scott, the complex propositions that it is not the case that Scott is Scottish, and that either snow is white or Scott is Scottish, are also directly about Scott, although only mediately, since both are immediately directly about the proposition that Scott is Scottish.

However, on the assumption that constituency is a transitive relation, one can construct an argument against the thesis that if a proposition contains an object o as a constituent, then grasp of that proposition requires acquaintance with the object o .

Let “Harry” name the proposition that Hannah is a philosopher. Harry contains Hannah as a constituent. Suppose that John tells Bill that he is happy that Harry is true. John knows that “Harry” refers to a proposition, but is not himself acquainted with Hannah. If Bill trusts John, it seems that he can come to know by testimony that John is happy that Harry is true, and a fortiori grasps that proposition. But Harry contains Hannah as a constituent, and by transitivity, so does the proposition that John is happy that Harry is true. So Bill’s thought that John is happy that Harry is true is not a singular thought about Hannah, though it has as its content a Russellian singular proposition containing Hannah as a constituent. Bill can therefore grasp a proposition containing an object as a constituent, without having acquaintance with that constituent.¹²

The only way we can think of to reply to this argument is to deny that Hannah occurs as a constituent in the relevant sense in the proposition that John is happy

¹² We owe this argument to Timothy Williamson (p.c.).

that Harry is true. The difficulty in developing this reply is that one must do so in a manner that preserves the transitivity of constituency. Perhaps one can define a notion of *proper constituency* that is transitive, and use it to deny that Hannah occurs as a proper constituent in the proposition that John is happy that Harry is true.¹³ We will not explore such a theory here.¹⁴ The aim of our paper has been to refute one direction of the bi-conditional that a thought is a singular thought about an object if and only if on a Russellian account of content, it contains that object as a constituent. It suffices for our purposes here to note that there are significant problems with the other direction of the bi-conditional as well.

6. According to the Russellian structured account, a proposition is directly about an object *o* if and only if it contains *o* as a constituent. The Russellian structured account of singular propositions is an initially promising way to ground the distinction, so crucial for many debates in philosophy, between propositional contents that are epistemically and metaphysically connected to particular objects, and contents that are not. However, even on a semantic theory that employs Russellian structured propositions as contents, there are propositions that are about particular objects in exactly the same way as paradigm singular propositions are about particular objects, but do not contain those objects as constituents. This suggests that the Russellian analysis of the important category of singular thought fails; the attempt to ground it in terms of *constituency* is incorrect. One of the putative theoretical advantages of the Russellian structured approach to propositions is thereby undermined. As we have also shown, the assumption that grasp of a primitive operator or function does not require acquaintance with an object has a potentially corrosive effect on other debates as well; a decisive refutation of it is long overdue.¹⁵

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¹³ This is not Salmon's distinction, introduced in the quote above, between immediate and mediate constituency. Presumably, grasp of the proposition that it is not the case that Hannah is a philosopher requires acquaintance with Hannah, even though Hannah is not an immediate constituent of the proposition that it is not the case that Hannah is a philosopher.

¹⁴ One fruitful avenue to explore would begin with the account of the paradox in King (2007, Chap. 7).

¹⁵ We are grateful to Jeffrey King, Ian Proops, Timothy Williamson, and audiences at St. Andrews University and Oxford University for discussion.

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