Singular Thought and (Augmented) Russellianism

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**I. Introduction**

A. Many philosophers believe that there is a kind of thought about an object that is in some sense particularly directly about the object.

1. I will use the terms *de re* or *singular thought* for thoughts of this sort.

B. I plan to outline a broadly Russellian approach to singular thought and explore its consequences in section 1 below.

**II. (A certain version of) Russellianism**

A. As I use the term, a *Russellian* believes that propositions have as constituents objects, properties and relations.

1. *Singular propositions* are propositions containing objects as constituents and I’ll say that a proposition that contains an object o as a constituent is *singular with respect to o.*

B. Russellians have what appears to be a very natural and compelling account of singular thought: to have a singular thought about an object o is to have a thought whose content is a proposition that is singular with respect to o.

1. I’ll stipulatively call this the *Russellian Account of Singular Thought* (*RAST*).

a. For the purposes of the present paper, I’ll be assuming it.

C. I’ll also be assuming that names, pronouns and indexicals are *devices of* *direct reference*: they contribute to propositions expressed in contexts by sentences in which they occur the objects that are their semantic values relative to the contexts.

D. Advocates of RAST who accept that pronouns, names and indexicals are directly referential are bound to think that attitude ascriptions that contain pronouns, names or indexicals in their complement clauses attribute attitudes towards propositions relative to contexts that are singular with respect to the semantic values of those expressions relative to the contexts.

1. Similarly, advocates of RAST are bound to think that an attitude ascription in which a quantifier outside the complement clause binds a variable in it requires for its truth in a context that the subject of the ascription has an attitude towards a singular proposition.

a. Let’s call such ascriptions *de re* *ascriptions*.

E. Finally, I assume that speaker judgments about truth-values of sentences relative to contexts and circumstances of evaluation are reliable and target the semantic contents of the sentences at the contexts.

1. This final addition forces our hand on Frege puzzle cases involving directly referential expressions.

2. Speakers in a given context may well judge that ‘Lois believes Clark can fly.’ is false, whereas ‘Lois believes Superman can fly’ is true. If speakers’ judgments are reliable guides to semantic content, these sentences must have different semantic contents.

3. I’ll assume we get this result by somehow introducing *guises* into our semantics of belief ascriptions.

F. Let’s call the package of views that combines RAST, the view that names, pronouns and indexicals are directly referential, the view that *de re* ascriptions attribute attitudes towards singular propositions, the view that judgments about truth and falsity of sentences relative to contexts and circumstances are accurate indicators of semantic contents relative to contexts, and the view that our semantics for belief ascriptions somehow invokes guises, the *Russellian Account of Singular Thought Augmented* (*RASTA*).

G. In cases in which no *de re* ascription of a certain sort is true, the best explanation of that fact presumably is that the subject of the ascription has no singular thought of the relevant sort.

**III. Some consequences of RASTA**

A. A first obvious consequence of RASTA is that acquaintance is not required for *de re* thought.

1. Hawthorne and Manley [2012] provide many sorts of cases in which e.g. an attitude ascription in which an existential quantifier outside of the complement binds a variable in the complement is judged to be true, and hence RASTA entails that an attitude towards a singular proposition is truly attributed to the subject of the ascription, but where it is implausible to think that the subject of the ascription has any acquaintance with the relevant object that the proposition is singular with respect to.

2. Example

a. Henry VIII commissions the construction of a large warship.

b. He is told by the extremely reliable builders when the great ship will be done.

c. He hears nothing about the construction of the ship, nor does he ever visit the construction site during the period of construction.

d. A while after the promised date of construction, Henry decides to go see the ship and is very excited about it.

i. In fact, the ship has been completed.

e. In such a case, ‘There is a ship Henry believes he will see.’ surely seems true.

f. But this attributes belief in a singular proposition to Henry according to RASTA.

g. According to RASTA, then, Henry has a singular thought about the ship.

h. Yet on virtually any plausible story about acquaintance, Henry is not acquainted with the ship in question.

B. A second obvious consequence of RASTA is that the truth conditions of *de re* ascriptions are context dependent because the same expression can invoke different guises in different contexts.

1. Suppose Karen has met Mark Twain and considers him a great author. She has never heard of Samuel Clemens.

2. We are in a context in which we ask Karen if Clemens is a great author to which she responds ‘I have no idea. Who is he?’.

3. In such a context, RASTA predicts that ‘Karen believes that Sam Clemens is a great author’ is false.

4. Suppose now we are in a context in which it is common ground that Twain is Clemens and in which the speakers tend to use ‘Clemens’ as a name for Twain/Clemens.

5. There is a disagreement about whether Clemens is a great author.

6. I know that everyone values Karen’s views about the quality of authors and I say ‘Well I can tell you that Karen believes Clemens is a great author.’

7. Here RASTA predicts the *de re* ascription is true.

8. The *de re* ascription here attributes to Karen a belief in the same proposition in both contexts: the singular proposition that Twain/Clemens is a great author.

a. However, set in the two contexts the ascription differs in what guise it asserts she believes it under.

9. So the guise under which the subject of such a *de re* ascription is claimed to believe the singular proposition is determined in context somehow.

C. However, there is a much more radical sort of contextual dependence that RASTA commits us to.

1. To see this, consider an example from Sosa [1970].

2. There is a prominent citizen of Metropolis who suffers from pyromania.

3. As a result, he has started a few fires.

a. Let’s call him the Metropolis Pyromaniac (MP), but let’s stipulate that the police have not yet introduced a name for him.

4. Sordid place that it is, Metropolis has many other arsonists.

5. But because of certain peculiarities of MP’s fire starting techniques, police know when they come across one of his fires.

6. The police have just come across a new fire and the Head Detective (HD) has determined it is the work of MP.

7. If HD were asked by reporters whether he knew who started these fires, he would think he was speaking truly in answering ‘No’.

8. As a result, the police are in no position to make an arrest. Now consider a context in which another detective first approaches the scene of the latest fire to find HD sifting through evidence at the scene.

9. ‘Whadya think?’ he says to HD.

10. HD responds ‘There is someone I suspect of having started this fire. It’s the same guy who started the San Clemente and Santa Monica fires.’

11. I take it that we would judge the *de re* ascription to be true in this context, since HD has recognized MP’s handiwork.

12. RASTA entails that we have the attribution of an attitude towards a singular proposition here.

a. And since the sentence seems true in this context, RASTA entails that HD believes a singular proposition regarding MP.

13. However, now consider a different context.

14. Suppose that after examining the most recent fire, HD holds a press conference. Reporters are eager to know if HD is in a position to make an arrest.

15. A reporter shouts out: ‘Do you have any suspects?

16. Should we expect an arrest today?’ Here ‘There is someone I suspect of having started this fire.’ in HD’s mouth seems false and HD should respond to the question by saying ‘No’.

17. Further, we can imagine that no ascription of the form ‘HD suspects e started the fire’ where e is a name, demonstrative or indexical seems true in this context.

18. But then, it appears that RASTA is committed to the claim that HD does not have an attitude toward a singular proposition regarding MP.

D. But now it seems we have shown that according to RASTA, HD does and does not have an attitude towards a singular proposition about MP with no change in his relevant beliefs or cognitive connection to MP!

1. What the advocate of RASTA should claim is that, setting aside for now issues involving the contextual sensitivity of *de re* ascriptions due to guises, what the case shows is that *de re* ascriptions are contextually sensitive in another way.

2. One way to think about it is that ‘suspects’ expresses different relations S1 and S2 in the above two contexts that are more or less demanding as to what is required in order for a *de re* ascription to be true.

E. But according to RASTA, how should we describe the situation regarding HD and MP in terms of HD having an attitude towards a singular proposition regarding MP, call it P, and HD having a singular thought about MP?

1. Reverting to the idea that attitude verbs are contextually sensitive in expressing relations in context that are more or less lax in what they require for subjects to bear them to singular propositions, consider the relations S1 (lax) and S2 (more strict) expressed by ‘suspects’ in the two contexts respectively.

2. HD bears S1 to P and fails to bear S2 to P.

F. What goes for having attitudes towards singular propositions goes for having singular thoughts according to RASTA, since the latter consists in the former.

1. In particular, since RASTA takes having attitudes towards singular propositions to be constitutive of having singular thoughts, in virtue of HD bearing the relation S1 to the singular proposition P involving MP, HD has a singular thought about MP.

G. What is it about context that determines whether an attitude verb expresses a lax relation that it is easy to bear to singular propositions or a more stringent one?

1. A reasonable thing to say is that the interests of speakers and hearers in a given context make it more or less useful to ascribe a thought directly about an object—a singular thought--to someone.

2. If speakers’ and hearers’ interests in a given context make it useful to ascribe a singular thought to an individual, the relevant attitude verb expresses a sufficiently lax relation and the relevant *de* r*e* ascriptions will be true in that context.

H. Another example.

1. Suppose Glenn believes all politicians are corrupt.

2. I meet the mayor of San Diego, Bob, at a party.

3. Glenn has never met or heard of Bob.

4. I can truly say to him ‘Glenn believes you are corrupt.’

5. I can also truly say to someone else at the party (pointing at Bob) ‘Glenn believes he is corrupt.’ or ‘There is someone at this party Glenn believes to be corrupt.’

6. Now change the context in the following way.

7. Glenn’s boss is throwing a party as a fundraiser for a charity.

8. Again, Glenn has never met or heard of Bob, and believes all politicians are corrupt.

9. Glenn’s boss tells Glenn and the other employees to look over the guest list, which includes Bob, and tell him if anyone corrupt is on it.

10. The boss is adamant that should anyone fail to tell him about someone they believe to be corrupt, they will be fired.

11. Glenn and the others look over the list and no one says anything.

12. Alan, a conniving coworker of Glenn’s who is always trying to get Glenn in trouble and who knows both Glenn’s views on politicians and Bob’s profession, says to Glenn’s boss at the party pointing at Bob: ‘I am surprised Glenn didn’t say anything: Glenn believes he is corrupt.’

13. This seems false in the new context, as would ‘There is someone at this party Glenn believes to be corrupt.’ or any other such *de re* ascription concerning Bob to the effect that Glenn believes him to be corrupt.

14. In this case again, it seems that the difference in the speakers’ and hearers’ interests in the two contexts determines whether the relevant *de re* ascriptions are true or not in each context.

I. Perhaps we can put a more contemporary gloss on the claim that interests of speakers and hearers in contexts (partly) determine whether *de re* ascriptions are true or false in those contexts by saying that the latter is (partly) determined by the *questions under discussion* (QUD) in the context.

1. Since QUD are thought by many to be features of the context of utterance, we have an independently motivated feature of context to appeal to as the thing that (partly) determines whether *de re* ascriptions are true or false in those contexts.

**IV. Two claims one might deny**

A. The argument I have given that RASTA is committed to there being acquaintanceless singular thought and to *de re* ascriptions being contextually sensitive leaned heavily on whether a given *de re* ascription seemed true.

1. This obviously amounts to giving linguistic data a very big role to play in deciding whether singular thought is present in a given case or not.

B. To some who wish to avoid the commitments of RASTA, including acquaintanceless singular thought and the context sensitivity of *de re* ascriptions, it may appear attractive to either deny that the truth of *de re* ascriptions requires attitudes towards singular propositions or deny that speakers’ judgments about truth and falsity are accurate guides to the actual truth and falsity of semantic contents.

1. A word about each of these denials.

**V. The Protean character of acquaintanceless *de re* thought**

A. At the outset, I mentioned that the paradigm case of singular thought is a case in which in perceiving an object one has thoughts directly about the perceived thing.

1. We have now seen that RASTA is committed to acquaintanceless singular thought and to the context dependence of *de re* ascriptions.

B. However, it may be that there is an important difference between cases of acquaintanceless singular thought and paradigmatic cases.

C. I conjecture that in all cases of acquaintanceless *de re* thought where no names for the relevant object are available to the speaker, we can find another context where no relevant *de re* ascriptions are true where there has been no relevant change in the cognitive connection between the subject of the ascription and the relevant object.

1. Consider again Hawthorne and Manley’s [2012] case of Henry VIII.

2. Now consider the following context.

a. As before, Henry orders the construction of the ship.

b. However, because they know Henry likes surprises and elaborate events, the ship builders build three identical ships unbeknownst to Henry.

c. Before construction, Henry’s name was carved on one of the three keels.

d. Tape was placed over it and tape was put in the same place on the other three keels so that no one would know which keel bore Henry’s name.

e. The identical ships were then constructed with no one knowing which had the keel with Henry’s name on it.

f. The ship builders agreed that the ship whose keel bears Henry’s name was the one he commissioned.

3. Workmen discussing the ship and Henry:

Marc: ‘So which ship is Henry’s?”

Samuel: ‘I don’t know; no one does’

Marc: ‘Does Henry know which ship is his?’

Samuel: ‘No, not even Henry. He doesn’t even know there are three ships, let alone which of the three is his.’

Marc: ‘So though Henry correctly believes he will see his ship, there is no ship such that Henry believes he is going to see *it*.’

Samuel: ‘Yes, that’s right.’

**VI. The resilience of paradigm *de re* thought.**

A. Assuming RASTA, in what I have called paradigmatic cases of singular thought, cases in which I am perceiving an object and occurrently entertaining thoughts in some sense directly about the object I am perceiving, we just don’t seem to be able to shift the context without changing the cognitive lives of the subjects of the ascriptions in such a way that no relevant *de re* ascriptions are true.

B. As I sit here in San Clemente, California, I am looking at my *Lost* surfboard.

1. The following are both true in my current context: ‘There is an object that Jeff thinks is a beautifully made surfboard.’; (two people mutually aware that they are attending to the board) ‘Jeff thinks *it* has elegant lines.’

C. Now it seems to me that we can’t change the context while keeping my perceptual and cognitive connection to the surfboard intact and get these sorts of *de re* ascriptions to go false.

D. The reason, given what we have said about why *de re* ascriptions can change truth-value across contexts, is that even when contexts force attitude verbs to express very stringent relations that it is hard to bear towards singular propositions, the subject of a *de re* ascription in the case of paradigm singular thought still bears those relations to singular propositions regarding the object she is perceiving.

1. It seems to me that this is a sort of vindication of traditional, acquaintance-based ways of thinking about singular thought.

E. In paradigmatic cases of acquaintance (looking at an object in good light, etc.), *de* *re* ascriptions don’t change truth-value across contexts.

**VII. Where the boats have no names**

A. Above, I showed that according to RASTA, *de re* ascriptions are contextually sensitive.

1. I focused on cases in which names for the relevant objects were not available to the subjects of the *de re* ascriptions and so used *de re* ascriptions in which existential quantifiers outside of the complements of the ascriptions bound variables inside the complements, or ascriptions in which the complements contained a pronoun or indexical.

2. The reason for that is that sometimes ascriptions containing the relevant names and ascriptions with quantifiers quantifying in pull us in different directions with respect to the question of whether someone has an attitude toward a singular proposition.

3. Consider the case of Henry and his new ship discussed above.

4. Now consider the following variant on it, where when he commissioned the ship Henry decided it would be named ‘Henry Grace à Dieu’ and this is known to the participants in the following conversation.

5. As before, the workers know that Henry knows the completion date has passed and that he is planning to visit to see his ship:

Marc: ‘Does Henry believe he will see Henry Grace à Dieu?’

Samuel: ‘Yes, he does.

Marc: ‘So which ship is Henry’s?”

Samuel: ‘I don’t know; no one does’

Marc: ‘Does Henry know which ship is his?’

Samuel: ‘No, not even Henry. He doesn’t even know there are three ships, let alone which of the three is his.’

Marc: ‘So though Henry correctly believes he will see his ship, there is no ship such that Henry believes he is going to see *it*.’

Samuel: ‘Yes, that’s right.’

6. Both ascriptions seem perfectly acceptable.

7. But according to RASTA, the truth of the ascription in line 1 (which Samuel affirms in line 2) requires Henry to bear whatever relation is expressed by ‘believes’ in this context towards a singular proposition involving his ship; and the truth of the ascription in the penultimate line suggests that he doesn’t bear this relation to that proposition.

a. What to do?

B. Could it be that there is a change of context between the first line and the penultimate line such that the *de re* ascription is true in the initial context but not in the context when the penultimate line is uttered since ‘believes’ expresses a more stringent relation in this later context than it did in the initial context?

1. In this case, that can seem plausible.

2. However, it seems to me that in the following discourse, both ascriptions are fine as well:

Marc: ‘So which ship is Henry’s?”

Samuel: ‘I don’t know; no one does’

Marc: ‘Does Henry know which ship is his?’

Samuel: ‘No, not even Henry. He doesn’t even know there are three ships, let alone which of the three is his.’

Marc: ‘So though Henry correctly believes he will see his ship, there is no ship such that Henry believes he is going to see *it*.’

Samuel: ‘Yes, that’s right.’

Marc: ‘Didn’t Henry name the ship Henry Grace à Dieu?’

Samuel: ‘Yes, he did.’

Marc: ‘So at any rate, Henry believes he will see Henry Grace à Dieu.’

Samuel: ‘Right.’

3. Here the claim that the context shifts between lines five and nine seems to me considerably less plausible.

C. A second strategy for dealing with the fact that both ascriptions are true is to deny that the ascription ‘Henry believes he will see Henry Grace à Dieu’ ascribes belief in a singular proposition.

1. Though RASTA holds that generally names are devices of direct reference, perhaps it could be claimed that in certain circumstances names make descriptive contributions to propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur.

D. A final strategy for reconciling our two apparently conflicting ascriptions in the above case is to hold that a quantifying in ascription in a given context may put constraints on the guise under which the subject is claimed to believe (or fail to believe) the relevant singular proposition.

1. If we want to maintain the RASTA advocate’s view that speakers’ judgments about truth-values are accurate guides to the truth-values of semantic contents (relative to context) and if we claim that constraints on which guise a singular proposition must (not) be believed under affect such judgments in the case of quantifying in ascriptions, then such constraints must be built into the semantics of quantifying in ascriptions.

2. The crucial point is that the quantifying in ascription in our dialogues will be understood as claiming that Henry does not believe the singular proposition concerning his ship that he will see it under any guise other than the one invoked by the name ‘Henry Grace à Dieu’ in the ascription ‘Henry believes he will see Henry Grace à Dieu’ that also occurs in that dialogue.

3. If we say that “negative” quantifying in ascriptions (‘There is *no* ship…’) in context may constrain under which guises the subject of the ascription may believe the relevant singular proposition in the sense of claiming only that the subject does not believe it under such-and-such guises, we should be prepared to say that “positive” quantifying in ascriptions (‘There is a ship…’) may require that the relevant singular proposition be believed under a certain guise or range of guises.

4. It may be, then, that this is the approach to reconciling what initially appear to be conflicting *de re* ascriptions that best fits with RASTA.

E. This last way of dealing with the problem of apparently conflicting *de re* ascriptions has the effect of making “positive” quantifying in ascriptions stronger.

1. They now require the subject to have an attitude towards the relevant singular proposition *and* do so under some particular guise or range of guises.

**VIII. RASTA’s picture of singular thought**

A. What sort of picture of singular thought does RASTA give us?

1. I would say that it is a very *pragmatic* picture.

2. The interests of speakers and hearers, or QUD, in a context make it more or less useful to ascribe to a subject a thought directly about a certain object.

3. The reasons for this can be various.

B. When it is useful in a context of conversation to take a subject’s thoughts to be directly about an object o, the context determines relations expressed by attitude verbs in it such that the subject bears those relations to propositions that are singular with respect to o.

1. In extreme cases, the subject’s cognitive connection to o may be quite remote, but the subject still succeeds in having singular thoughts about o.

2. The Glenn case is such an extreme case, and such cases can be considered degenerate cases of singular thought.

3. At the other end of the spectrum are paradigm cases of singular thought: cases in which a subject is perceiving an object in good perceptual conditions and having thoughts about it while perceiving it.

C. If we consider cases in which *de re* ascriptions are true in one context, so that the subject of the ascription has an attitude towards a singular proposition and hence a singular thought, but false in another, this means that though it served speaker and hearer interests in the first context to take the subject’s thoughts to be directly about an object, it does not do so, or it serves speaker and hearer interests *not* to take the thoughts to be directly about the object, in the second context.

1. In the first context, lax relations to singular propositions are expressed by attitude verbs; in the second context more stringent relations are expressed.

2. Thus, in the second context, that the subject bears lax relations to a singular proposition is not of interest or it is of interest to ignore them.

D. Consider again HD.

**IX. Rachel Goodman’s take on RASTA**

A. I began by saying that according to RASTA (really RAST), having a singular thought *just is* having a thought whose content is a singular proposition.

1. Assuming RASTA, if a *de re* attitude ascription is true in a context, the subject of the ascription must bear the relation expressed by the attitude verb in that context to a singular proposition.

2. According to RASTA, having an attitude towards a singular proposition *just is* having a thought with a singular proposition as its content and hence having a singular thought.

B. Rachel Goodman (p.c.) suggested altering RASTA by giving up the claim that *in general* in bearing the relation expressed by an attitude verb in context to a singular proposition, one has a thought whose content is a singular proposition and hence a singular thought.

C. Of course in embracing this idea, we give up one advantage of the version of RASTA I have been discussing: on the version of RASTA I have endorsed to this point, the truth of *de re* attitude ascriptions is our guide to the presence of singular thought.

1. Thereby we not only have a reliable way of detecting singular thought, but the notion of singular thought is systematically reflected in our talk about each other’s thoughts as we would expect it to be if it is a distinctive and significant phenomenon.

D. So if we give up the idea that truth of *de re* belief ascriptions is our guide to the presence of singular thought as Goodman suggests, we would have to come up with a different principled way of determining when singular thought is present (i.e. when a thought *really does* have as its content a singular proposition).

E. But perhaps a phenomenon noted earlier would help.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. I noted that in cases in of what I called *paradigmatic singular thought*—cases in which I am visually perceiving an object and occurrently having thoughts directed at the perceived object—we can’t get all relevant *de re* ascriptions to go false by changing the context without changing the cognitive situation of the subject of the ascription in the way we can e.g. with cases in which *de re* ascriptions are true in a context even though the subject of the ascription is not acquainted with the relevant object.

2. Instead of saying as I did earlier that these were *paradigmatic* cases of singular thought and that they were the *most directly* about objects, perhaps roughly following Goodman’s suggested version of RASTA we should say that only in these cases do we really have singular thoughts at all: thoughts whose contents are singular propositions.

3. In other cases in which we only bear more lax relations expressed by attitude verbs in context to singular propositions, the contents of our thoughts are not singular propositions.

4. Our relations to singular propositions in these latter cases are less direct and more mediated than in cases of (what we are now calling) real singular thought where *the thought itself* has a singular proposition as its content.

5. On such a way of construing RASTA, as Goodman pointed out, it appears *not* to entail that there is acquaintanceless singular thought.

1. This I think is *not* part of what Goodman suggested. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)