What Makes Thoughts about Specific Things?

Hugo Heagren*

University of Cambridge

Some thoughts have 'objects'—things those thoughts are about. Answers to questions about the relation between thoughts and their objects often appeal to a distinction between singular and general thoughts. Singular thoughts are supposed to have somehow more particular or specific objects, general thoughts less so. I argue that no such distinction exists, and that though one could be constructed this would not be philosophically useful. §1 surveys views on the nature of the singular/general distinction. §2 lists three problems with this distinction. Consideration of these problems leads to a finer-grained distinction between singular and general concepts in §3, and I motivate this with examples and methods of argument from literature in §4. In the last section I consider a possible objection. I argue that though there is a sense in which it is technically correct, it does not achieve anything philosophically useful.

1 Introduction

Some thoughts are about things, especially existing things in the world, like books, the Moon and my father. What is it for a thought to be about a thing, and how — if at all — does the thought relate to what it is about? Answers to these questions have tended to distinguish different types of thought according to the sorts of things they are about, considering each type separately

The distinction between singular and general thoughts is often employed in this way. Taylor, for example, argues that "without an account of the inner form of singular thoughts we will be at a loss to understand how singular thought . . . achieve[s] semantic contact with objects".[1] Similarly, Bach writes that 'we need an account of how thoughts are about their objects'[2] and immediately gives an account of singular thought. For him, an account of singular thought is required for an explanation of how thought relates to the world. This is a good strategy. Certain relations only apply to certain kinds of relata. It makes sense to clarify the nature of the relata before asking about the relation.

Singular thoughts are supposed to have somehow more particular or specific objects, general thoughts less so. I argue no such distinction exists between the thoughts these philosophers consider, and constructing one is philosophically useless. I propose a finer-grained distinction between singular and general concepts, motivated by examples and methods of argument ready to hand in the literature.

§1 surveys views on the nature of the singular/general distinction. §2 lists three problems with this distinction. First, that it cannot determine whether certain thoughts (even apparently exemplar singular thoughts) are singular or general. Second, that the singular/plural distinction, which distinguishes thoughts in a similar way to singularity/generality,

*I was awarded a philosophy degree from the University of Southampton in 2021, and will graduate this summer from the MPhil Philosophy at Cambridge. I work mostly in philosophy of language, perception and mind, especially on issues at their intersection concerning how humans access and interact with their surroundings. After my MPhil, I hope to continue in academia with a PhD.

1. Kenneth Taylor, "On Singularity," in *New Essays on Singular Thought*, ed. Robin Jeshion (Oxford University Press, 2010), 77.
2. Kent Bach, "Getting a Thing Into a Thought," in *New Essays on Singular Thought*, ed. Robin Jeshion (Oxford University Press, 2010), 39.

cannot adequately distinguish plural from superplural thoughts. Finally, that singularity of thought is often explained in terms of reference, but it is implausible that thoughts refer. Considering the last problem leads naturally to an alternate view, sketched in §3. This solves the other problems and is supported by (occasionally con- fused) approaches to the issue in the literature, discussed in §4. §5 considers a possible objection that an account of singular thought could be reconstructed from my account. While possible, I argue this would be arbitrary and of little theoretical use.

2 Singular Thought

Singular thought is understood in two ways in the literature, corresponding with Sainsbury's labels *internal* and *external* singularity.[3] A thought is externally singular if and only if 'there [exists] an object which the thought is about'. This is relational. Thoughts about the Moon are externally singular because it exists. Thoughts about Vulcan (the planet Le Verrier thought he had discovered) cannot be, because it does not exist.

Internally singular thoughts are those which "recruit resources of a kind appropriate to external singularity"[4]. For example: Jack wants a sloop called *The Mary Jane*. The Mary Jane never exists, but Jack imagines her in enough detail that any real boat fulfilling his description would be The Mary Jane. Sainsbury says that in thinking about The Mary Jane, Jack uses a concept of the same type he would if The Mary Jane existed, and he were thinking about that thing in particular. Jack thinks *as if* he is thinking about a particular existing boat — though he is not. Sainsbury thinks that internal singularity is the common internal form of externally singular thought. Being internally singular is merely a matter of the internal form of a thought, and all externally singular thoughts have this form. However, he also says there are thoughts of this form which are not externally singular — *merely* internally singular. Internally singular thoughts are thoughts which are 'as if' they are about particular existing things.

Some theories identify singular thought with externally singular thought. McDowell, for example, defines singular thought as "not . . . available to be thought or expressed if the relevant object, or objects, did not exist".[5] Jeshion's view is similar.[6]

At least for my purposes, singular thought is a theoretical or taxonomic classification, useful in investigating how thoughts relate to their objects. If singular thought were simply *defined* in terms of how it so relates, it would be theoretically useless. Those working with such theories are using the same terminology I am, but for a different task. They are investigating the nature of externally singular thought — for example, whether all externally singular thoughts are internally singular. I am concerned with the (alleged) nature of internally singular thought — I argue that the distinction between internally singular and general thoughts does not exist. Even if it were true that all externally singular thought is internally singular and vice versa, these are still distinct inquiries. Thus this essay concerns only internal singularity.

Crane's definition is similar to Sainsbury's internal singularity. Following Quine's distinction of singular and general terms by their grammatical role, singular thoughts are those with the cognitive role associated with thoughts which refer to just one object.[7] This includes thoughts which actually do so refer, and thoughts which only seem to, as in Sainsbury's account. Crane gives an example of singular thought:

1. *that man stole my wallet*[8]

He contrasts this with the general:

3. R. M. Sainsbury, "Intentionality Without Exotica," in *New Essays on Singular Thought*, ed. n Robin Jeshio (2010), 300.

4. Sainsbury, 300.

5. John McDowell, "Truth-Value Gaps," in *Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science VI: Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress of Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. L. J. Cohen (North Holland Publishing Co, 1982), 304.

6. Robin Jeshion, "Introduction to New Essays on Singular Thought," in *New Essays on Singular Thought*, ed. Robin Jeshion (Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

7. Tim Crane and Jody Azzouni, "Singular Thought," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 85, no. 1 (2011): 22, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8349.2011.00194.x.

8. Italics indicate the sentence expressing a thought. *'That man stole my wallet'* abbreviates 'the thought naturally expressed by the sentence 'that man stole my wallet"

2. *someone stole my wallet*[9]

Azzouni agrees with Crane.[10] His examples are *Bertrand Russell was born in 1872* (singular) and *Anyone who invented the theory of descriptions, co-wrote a work in mathematical logic, and was the only one to do these things, was born in 1872* (general).

In general, then, singular thoughts are thoughts which *seem* to refer to a particular, or *would* so refer if the relevant object existed. Crane sums this up: singular thoughts are where one "[has] some specific object or objects in mind"[11] Crane and Azzouni's examples are typical: most exemplar singular thoughts are expressed in full sentences. Thoughts like 1 or 2 are paradigm cases.

3 Problems for the Standard Distinction

Trying to distinguish between singular and general thoughts is problematic in at least three ways:

3.1 Multiple Subjects

First, even apparently paradigmatic singular thoughts have multiple subjects, and it is unclear which fixes the thought's status as singular or general.

Crane presents 1 s a clear example of singular thought. "[W]hen I think that *man stole my wallet*, I am 'aiming' in thought at just one object" [12]. This is true: I am thinking about *that man*, and if I uttered 'that man stole my wallet' I would intend to refer to him.

As well as *that man,* Example 1 is also about *my wallet* — also a single, particular object. This might look problematic if singularity is a matter of being about only one object, and Example 1 is about two. Not so. Crane and others recognise that singularity is not a matter of the total number of things thought about, but of their each being thought of "specifically", "particularly", or "individually."[13] 1 is not problematic because all of its subjects are singular.

But then it is unclear whether Example 2 is singular. Being about *someone*, it appears general, but being about *my wallet*, it appears singular. But the distinction is meant to be exclusive: no thought is both singular and general.

Similarly, Crane suggests elsewhere that a singular thought is just one which is typically expressed with a sentence containing a singular term[14]. If so, then 2 is singular, as it would contain 'my wallet', but Crane presents it as clearly general.

So Crane's classification of 1 as singular and 2 as general only makes sense when considering just the grammatical subjects of the sentences used to express them. The general problem is that an apparently singular thought will often be expressed by a sentence with singular and general terms. It is not clear which term is relevant to the distinction.

Crane might respond that 'someone' is the (grammatical) subject of 'someone stole my wallet', and only the subject of the sentence expressing a thought is relevant to singularity. But this does not solve the problem. It is still unclear whether Example 2 is singular of general. The same thought as Example 2 could equally be expressed by 'my wallet was stolen by someone', the subject of which is 'my wallet'. So a single thought can appear singular expressed one way,

9. Crane, "Singular Thought", 23.
10. Jody Azzouni, "Singular Thoughts (Objects-Directed Thoughts)," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 85, no. 1 (2011): 45.
11. Tim Crane, *The Objects of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 141.
12. Crane 2011, p. 23
13. Crane 2013, p. 141; Azzouni 2011.
14. Crane 2013, p. 138.

general another, even if singularity is determined by the subject of the expressing sentence. To defend the singular/general distinction amongst thoughts, Crane could accept that one of these expressions of the thought is canonical such that only its subject determines the thought's singularity. This seems unlikely to me — surely 'someone stole my wallet' and 'my wallet was stolen by someone' express the same thought?

Furthermore, Crane himself seems to support a view like that I have argued — that none of the objects of a thought is privileged in determining its singularity. He appeals to a very loose notion of 'aboutness' in his account of singularity [15]. Singular thought is sometimes just said to be thought about a particular thing or things[16]. But a thought like *someone stole my wallet* is clearly about someone *and* my wallet. It seems arbitrary to choose one of the objects of the thought as primary.

Finally, even if the grammatical subject of the sentence expressing a thought is privileged, the singularity of the subject itself might be unclear. *There is a citizen of France who is bald* is about *a* citizen of France (no particular one), so appears general. But surely it is also about France (in the loose sense of aboutness described above), with reference to which the general citizen is conceptualised. France is a particular, so it appears singular.

In Examples 1 and 2, it was unclear whether the sentence was singular or general, because one term suggested singularity and the other generality. Here it is unclear whether the (constructed) term itself is singular or general. Even if the subject of a sentence expressing a thought is privileged, the singular/general distinction still cannot deliver a determinate answer for the status of some thoughts.

3.2 Superplurals

The second problem concerns plurality. In explaining what it is for a thought to be about a certain thing or things, a distinction is often recognised between singular and plural thoughts.

Thus far, 'singular' has been used as opposed to 'general', when a specific thing rather than a type of thing is being talked about. Here, 'singular' is used as opposed to 'plural' to indicate talking about one rather than many things. Context should sufficiently distinguish these uses.

Like the singular/general distinction, this is a distinction between the form of the objects of thoughts: singular thoughts are about one thing, plural thoughts are about many[17]. If it is thoughts which are singular or general, then it is thoughts which are singular or plural too. Thus, an argument that there is no singular/plural distinction between thoughts will at least suggest that there is no singular/general distinction either, as it will cast doubt on distinguishing between thoughts by the form of their objects. For authors who include singularity (as opposed to plurality) in their definitions of singular thought, this will pose a more direct problem[18].

A similar unclear-subject problem arises for plural thought. A thought like *I know those men* appears singular, because there is only one of me (*I*), and plural because there are many of *those men.* But there is a more specific problem for the singular/plural distinction. A thought like *these people play against each other and those people play against each other* is surely plural, because these people and those people are pluralities. By the same token, *these people and those people play against each other* is also plural. But the sentence used to express the second thought is superplural — it is about a plurality of pluralities (of objects). There are superplural sentences in English, and superplural examples are often composed of plural items.[19] There are also apparently plural thoughts, expressed using plural terms[20]. Given that plural terms are reflected in plural thoughts, it is likely that superplural terms are reflected in superplural thoughts. A framework which distinguishes singular from plural thoughts should be able to distinguish ordinary plurals from superplurals.

But a simple distinction between singular and plural thoughts will be incapable of this, as the status of some

15. Crane 2013, 7.
16. Crane 2013, 141.
17. Crane 2013, 159; Azzouni.
18. Crane 2013.
19. Øystein Linnebo and David Nicolas, "Superplurals in English," *Analysis* 68, no. 3 (2008): 193.
20. Azzouni.

superplural terms will be unclear. *Those people and these people play against each other* appears superplural, because its expression includes the superplural term 'these people and those people'. But it also appears merely plural, because its expression includes the merely plural terms 'these people' and 'those people.' The apparent distinction seems to show that it is both superplural and merely plural, which is unacceptable. This problem has a similar form to the 'citizen of France' case: the status of one term in the expression of a thought is unclear. Distinguishing singularity from plurality at the level of whole thoughts thus fails to accurately distinguish plurals from superplurals.

This objection is against the singular/plural distinction, so it is not a knockdown argument against the singular/general distinction. However, as I wrote above, the two distinctions are very similar: they both distinguish between the form of the objects of thoughts ('if it is thoughts which are singular or general, then it is thoughts which are singular or plural too'). Showing that the standard singular/plural distinction fails thus casts doubt on the legitimacy of any such distinction, including that between singular and general terms. If thoughts are *not* singular or plural in the way previously supported, it is likely they are not singular or general as previously supported either.

3.3 Reference

The final problem is that singularity is generally accounted for in terms of reference, but thoughts are not the type of things which refer. Crane (2011), Azzouni (2011) and Sainsbury (2010) all invoke some notion of a thought referring in their accounts of singular thought. Crane notes that 'thought' can mean a mental episode of thinking, or the propositional or representational content *of* such an episode[21]. But neither of these things refers in the way a singular term like a name does.

It seems very unlikely that episodes of any kind refer. Reference is generally understood as a property or role of semantic items like names and descriptions, none of which are episodic.[22] It would seem very strange to ask what the referent was of a temporally extended episode. What, for example, could the event of my birth refer to? Extending this to mental episodes, it seems very unlikely that thought-episodes refer (except in a derivative sense discussed below).

It is more plausible that the content of a very simple thought — just holding an object 'in mind' — could refer like a name does. But examples like 1 which Crane and others give are not like this. Saying 'that man stole my wallet' is not like saying 'Matthew' or 'France.' Again, what would 'that man stole my wallet' (as a whole) refer to? It is much less plausible that the complex content of thoughts like these refers (as a whole) to anything.

4 Concepts

These problems suggest a natural solution. A defender of the idea that thoughts (purport to) refer might respond that there is a sense in which some episodic events *do* refer, and that thought episodes refer in the same way. A speech — as given at a conference or meeting — is a good example. Speeches are episodic, but there is still a sense in which a speech can be said to refer. For example, if someone gave a talk about American philosophers mentioning Jody Azzouni, one might say correctly that the speech referred to Azzouni. But the speech itself does not have a referent like a name does. It cannot be said to refer in the same sense that the name 'Jody Azzouni' refers to Jody Azzouni. Instead, the speech must include a term which *does* refer to Azzouni in the standard way — such as his name, or a description like 'the author of *Ontology without Borders*'.

So there is a sense in which the speech refers to Azzouni, but this is derivative of the fact that it contains a part which refers to him in the standard sense. A similar response could be made regarding the reference of thoughts: as a whole, a thought's content itself does not refer, but can be said to refer in virtue of containing some part (or composite of parts, like a description) which do refer. A thought episode then refers just if its content refers.

21. Crane 2011, 22.
22. Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1.

But reference in this sense is grounded in reference in the standard, semantic sense. For the speech to refer to the issue, the speech must contain as a part a term (a name or description) which refers to the issue in the same way a name does. It is a necessary condition of the speech referring that there is such a part which refers. It is these parts which either do or do not refer in the standard sense.

Given that singularity is so often cashed out in terms of reference, *these referential parts* should be distinguished as singular or general instead of whole thoughts, since the parts are doing all the theoretical work. A speaker only refers to a thing in so far as she uses terms which refer to it. Similarly, a thought only purports to refer to a thing in so far as it includes parts which purport to refer. This solves the third problem.

Recognising this, the problem of the unclear subject now dissolves. There is no question of whether 1 is singular or general (or singular or plural). Whole thoughts are not the sort of thing which are singular or general, their parts are.

Accordingly, singularity and generality can still be accounted for in Examples 1 and 2. *That man* and *my wallet* are singular, *someone* is general.

The same approach — decomposing, and judging the parts as singular or general — can be applied to some of the parts themselves. *There is a citizen of France who is bald* would be expressed using the term 'a citizen of France.' This is general, and citizen of France could make it true. But it also includes *France* as a part, which is singular. So some singular or general parts of thoughts are composed of parts wich are themselves singular or general.

Similarly, some plural-like terms are composed of parts which are themselves plural. *Those people* is plural, and *these people and those people* is superplural (though the constituent terms *these people* and *those people* are merely plural). This does not solve the issue of identifying superplural thoughts. A solution would be a way for the distinction between singular and plural thoughts to account for superplurality. Rather, this removes the problem entirely: thoughts are not singular or plural, concepts are, and their singular/plural/superplural status is always clear.

I think an appropriate term for these composable parts of thoughts is *concepts.* There are singular and general concepts, and singular and plural ones. In this I partly follow Sainsbury (2010), as the next section explains.

5 Prior Support

There is support for a view like this in the literature. Crane suggests that a distinction between singular and general thoughts follows Quine's distinction between singular and general terms[23]. Singular terms like names "purport to refer to just one object".[24] Crane then writes "It is widely accepted that just as there are general and singular terms, there are general and singular thoughts."[25]

But this analogy is misplaced. The semantic analogue of a thought is not a term, but a sentence. Sentences, not terms, are used to express thoughts. One does not express a thought with 'Sam' or 'ten', but with 'Sam has ten fingers.' Even if this is not true of all thoughts, apparently clear examples of singular thoughts (Examples 1 and 2) *are* expressed with sentences, so it presumably true of at least these. Crane's move from terms to thoughts is an unjustified slide.

Sentences are the analogues of thoughts and it is a certain class of sentences' parts (terms) which are singular or general. Sentences themselves are not singular or general. Carrying the singular/general distinction from language to thought, thoughts — like sentences — are not singular or general, a certain class of their parts there.

This is borne out by the ways in which Crane and Sainsbury actually account for singular thought. Crane begins by discussing what makes psychological episodes singular. Assuming that these episodes are representational, he briefly discusses the reference of names, then introduces 'mental files' as having similar referential properties. Crane only gives an

23. Crane 2011, 21-22.
24. Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 1960), 96.
25. Crane 2011, 22.

account of the nature of singularity with respect to these files, not thought episodes.[26] Each mental file is a representation of a thing, paradigmatically an existing object. Singular files are those which only make sense as representative of one object. General files make sense as representative of more than one. He seems to take this as sufficient for an account of the singularity of representational mental episodes.[27]

Crane is not explicit about the relationship between these files and thoughts (singular or otherwise). However, it is implausible that he means these files to *be* representational thoughts. If a file represents an object, what file would be associated with the thought *that man stole my wallet*? Crane clearly intends for a file on *that man* to be associated with it — this is why he thinks the thought is singular. A file on *my wallet* should be associated with it too, and possibly one of the event of the stealing. But these are not themselves the thought, they are parts of it, or are involved with how the thought comes about (this must be true as Crane thinks thoughts are episodic[28], but files are persistent[29]). So the details of Crane's account entail a distinction not between thoughts, but between files — the representational *parts* of thoughts. It is merely a terminological difference that Crane calls these files, and I call them concepts (as does Sainsbury).

Sainsbury has a similar account. His definition of singularity is in terms of concepts: *individual concepts* are those 'fit for using to think about individual things.' These concepts are then 'used in' thoughts[30]. Sainsbury does not say what this use consists in, or how individual concepts relate to singular thought, but the 'use' of these concepts is clearly a necessary condition — for him only thoughts which use individual concepts are singular. Again, this locates the reality of the singular/general distinction not in the thoughts themselves, but in the concepts used in them. What matters is whether the concepts used by a thought are individual (again, Sainsbury's individual concepts and my singular concepts are only terminologically distinct).

6 Reconstructing Singular Thought

It might be objected that an account of singular thoughts can be reconstructed from my account of singularity. Such a view might look like this: some concepts are general and some singular. The contents of thoughts are (perhaps structured or compositional) composites of concepts, much like sentences are structured composites of terms (and other words). Those thoughts with content including at least one singular concept are singular thoughts, and all the others are general.

But this does not reveal anything important about the nature of singular thought — it is merely an arbitrary labelling of a certain group of thoughts, which have something in common. One could just as well advance a theory on which singular thoughts are those which *only* contain singular concepts. This will deliver different results from the first theory, but there is no methodological reason to choose between them, and neither label seems philosophically more useful than simply describing 'thoughts using at least one singular concept' or 'thoughts which use only singular concepts.' By definition, both identify singular thoughts, but in both the distinction which is doing all the theoretical work is still between singular and general concepts. There is nothing contradictory or problematic about such theories, but I do not think there is anything particularly useful either. One might just as well introduce a label for the dust jackets on books of philosophy (but not other books), then investigate the relationship between such dust jackets and philosophy students' essays. Really one would be investigating the relationship between the philosophy books and the essays, but this would be masked by the label for the dust jackets. Similarly, one could introduce a label 'singular thought' for all thoughts which use singular concepts (or which only use singular concepts), and investigate how these relate to objects in the world. But using such a label would only obscure the fact that any results of this investigation really concern a relationship between certain *concepts* and objects, not the thoughts which use the concepts. The label would be redundant at best and confusing at worst.

A slightly different approach to reconstruction might claim that a sentence like Example 2 is general with respect to *someone* and singular with respect to *my wallet*. But this is just a different way of phrasing my point: singularity

26. Azzouni footnote 5 makes a similar point.
27. Crane 2011, 36-37.
28. Crane 2011, 22.
29. Crane 2011, 38.
30. Sainsbury 301-302.

is not a matter of thoughts, it is a matter of concepts: for every concept (*someone*, *my wallet*, etc.) there will be a separate fact about singularity or generality (and about singularity or plurality). Obscuring this distinction with less clear, indirect phrasing does not seem useful.

Thus the questions which the singular/general distinction was originally meant to help answer (what is it for a thought to be about a thing? How do thoughts relate to what their objects are?) can be reframed in terms of concepts. Much of the general discussion surrounding singular and general thoughts will apply *mutatis mutandis* to this distinction. This alone will not answer the questions, of course, but it will tell us something about the nature of thought, and how thoughts relate to the things they are about.

7 Conclusion

I have shown that the standard distinction between singular and general (and singular and plural) fails for many thoughts, including those often advanced as clear examples of singularity. The way it fails, and the approaches of some writers to singularity in thought and semantics suggest a better account: singularity, generality and plurality of concepts which are used in thoughts. Though this distinction can be used to reconstruct an account of singularity and generality for thoughts (indeed, several accounts), no such account is philosophically useful.

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