

Thought by Description

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It seems perfectly obvious that we all very frequently have thoughts that are directed upon or are *about* particular objects in the external world, including other persons as well as a vast number of types of ordinary physical thing. But the problem of what *makes* our thoughts and other cognitive attitudes about particular objects is extremely difficult. The problem received much attention from many skilled philosophers from the 1960s until the mid-1980s. But since then, the problem has received scant attention, even though I think no general consensus had been achieved regarding the form that a correct solution should take.¹

I would like to return to this problem here. My aim in this paper will be the limited one of motivating and defending my view that there are thoughts about objects that are based on description, where an object is thought about in such cases simply by virtue of the object's unique *satisfaction* of the description in question. There are of course other ways in which thoughts can be about objects. One can have thoughts about objects of which one is directly aware, including oneself and one's own mental acts, states, and experiences. And one can have thoughts about objects on the basis of one's perception of the objects in sense experience. In such cases, in my view, one need not possess any descriptive information that is true of the objects thought about, in

¹ To be sure, there has been much valuable work during this period on both the semantics of singular terms and the nature of thought contents and their ascription, including for example the work by Neale (1990), Richard (1990), Recanati (1993) and Soames (2002). But none of this work specifically addresses the problem of what makes thoughts about objects. And when the topic has been mentioned at all, the tendency has been to just assume that some sort of unexplained causal relation will solve the problem. (See for instance Recanati 1993, p. 112.) But this tendency represents no real advance beyond the original suggestions of a causal theory of mental reference by such philosophers as Kaplan (1969), Donnellan (1970, 1977) and Evans (1973). I will discuss causal views below in section 2.

order to think about them. But in situations in which a person is neither directly nor perceptually aware of an object, the person's thought is about that object, at least typically, and perhaps always, because the object uniquely satisfies the description or descriptions on which the thinker's mental act of reference is based.

My conception of the way that mental reference is determined by description is to be understood on analogy with the semantic phenomenon of reference-fixing by description, which was first clearly explained by Kripke (1972). This feature of my view serves to distinguish it from another, earlier form of description theory that I will call 'the Fregean view.' The primary difference between the two views concerns the *logical form* of the propositional contents of thoughts about objects. On the Fregean view, these contents are purely descriptive in nature, being of the form 'The F is G.' On my view, by contrast, the contents of thoughts about objects are always Russellian singular propositions which have the objects thought about as constituents.

Below I will explain and argue for my description theory of mental reference. I will also defend my theory against the most serious objection it faces, an objection that was raised by Donnellan (1977).

1. The Fregean View

In the 1960s, the problem of what makes thoughts and other cognitive attitudes about objects began to receive close attention, due largely to the seminal work of W. V. Quine on the *de re/de dicto* distinction, especially in his 1956 paper "Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes." In that paper, Quine emphasized a distinction that holds between two kinds of belief ascriptions that contain singular terms like definite descriptions:

- (1) Ralph believes that the man in the brown hat is a spy.
- (2) Ralph believes of (or about) the man in the brown hat that he is a spy.²

Quine calls ascriptions like (1) 'notional.' They are also commonly called '*de dicto*' since they explicitly ascribe a specific propositional content (a *dictum*) to Ralph's beliefs. By contrast, Quine calls ascriptions like (2) 'relational.' Such ascriptions are also called '*de re*,' because they ascribe a mental relation between the believer and the object (or *res*) that his or her belief is *about*.

² The distinction between (1) and (2) corresponds to the distinction which Russell (1905) had made between secondary and primary occurrences of definite descriptions.

Given Quine's way of explaining the *de re/de dicto* distinction, it is plausible to suppose that *de dicto* ascriptions *fully* characterize beliefs and other attitudes in terms of their (whole) propositional contents, while *de re* ascriptions only *partially* characterize a belief as being *about* a given object (the man in the brown hat, say) and as having a given predicative content (being a spy, say). This led many philosophers to infer that *de re* ascriptions could be *defined* in terms of *de dicto* ascriptions, and thus to believe that we could account for what makes thoughts *about* objects (what makes *de re* ascriptions true) by appealing in part to the thoughts' having certain kinds of propositional contents (appealing to what makes *de dicto* ascriptions true).

This way of looking at the *de re/de dicto* distinction led to a number of attempts to give what I will call 'Fregean' accounts of what makes thoughts about objects. Such accounts were defended by many prominent philosophers from the 1950s into the 1970s, including Kaplan (1969), Sellars (1969), Sosa (1970), Chisholm (1976b) and Castañeda (1967, 1972). Even Quine himself had assumed something like a Fregean view in his (1956), where he said that a *de dicto* ascription like (1) logically implies a *de re* ascription like (2) by a form of exportation (p. 188). These Fregean accounts held that thoughts are either always or often about particular objects by virtue of the thoughts' involving Fregean descriptive senses, modes of presentation, or individual concepts which are satisfied by the objects in question. There perhaps was no general agreement as to whether Fregean senses are always of the descriptive sort expressed by definite descriptions. After all, it surely seems that a first person thought about oneself need not be based on *any* description. (See Sosa 1969, p. 69.) So perhaps one's first person thoughts about oneself are *via* special Fregean non-descriptive self-concepts. (See for instance Chisholm 1976a, Chapter One.)

But there was general agreement among many of the defenders of the Fregean view that having a thought involving a descriptive sense was at least *sufficient* for the thought's being of or about the object that uniquely satisfies the sense.³ So I will take the Fregean view to be committed at a minimum to the following principle:

The Liberal Theory of Aboutness (LTA)

Necessarily, for any person *x*, object *y*, and property *G*, *if* there is a property *F* such that (i) *y* = the *F*, (ii) *x* believes that the *F* is *G*, and (iii) the proposition that the *F* is *G* entails that the *F* exists, *then* *x* believes of or about *y* that *y* is *G*.

³ With Kaplan (1969) being a notable exception. See below.

I have stated (LTA) in terms of belief, but defenders of the Fregean view would have endorsed a similar principle for all other cognitive attitudes, including thought, knowledge, intention, and desire. I call this principle the ‘Liberal Theory of Aboutness,’ since the principle makes it relatively easy to have beliefs that are about objects. (Chisholm (1976b) similarly called such views ‘latitudinarian.’)

Though it was widely endorsed, a serious defect was found in the Fregean view at about the same time as it was first proposed. Sleigh (1967, p. 28) gave the following counterexample, which applies to (LTA).⁴ Suppose that Tom knows that there are spies, and also knows that in any non-empty set of human beings, one is older than any other. Using a modicum of logic, Tom then deduces from what he knows that the oldest spy is a spy. So we have

(3) Tom knows that the oldest spy is a spy.

But since knowledge that p implies that p is true, it also follows from (3) that

(4) The oldest spy exists.

And then, by the principle for knowledge analogous to (LTA) it follows that

(5) There is someone y , namely the oldest spy, such that Tom knows of y that y is a spy.

But it certainly seems absurd to suppose that Tom could come to have knowledge regarding some particular person to the effect that that person is a spy, merely by knowing that one among the spies is oldest.

Thus Sleigh provided a powerful counterexample to the principle for knowledge analogous to (LTA). Of course a similar counterexample

⁴ Sleigh actually directed his counterexample against Quine’s assumption that a certain principle of “exportation,” which in effect is the principle (LTA), is valid. (Quine 1956, p. 188.) Sleigh gave credit to Hintikka (1962, pp. 141–44) for the type of example he used. But Hintikka had used his similar example to argue for a quite different conclusion, and in fact Sleigh later showed (1968, pp. 396–98) that Hintikka’s argument is unsound (as Sosa 1969, p. 68 also showed). Somewhat later, both Kaplan (1969, p. 220) and Sosa (1969, p. 71) gave counterexamples to Quine’s principle of exportation that were substantially the same as Sleigh’s example. (Though Sosa’s counterexample was directed against Sellars’s (1969) version of the Fregean view.) Quine quickly capitulated, agreeing (after input from Kripke) that Sleigh had shown that his principle of exportation is false (Quine 1969, pp. 337–38, 341–42). In fairness to Quine, we should note (as Quine did, 1969, p. 341) that he “luckily made no use” of his principle of exportation in his (1956).

applies to (LTA) itself, merely by replacing ‘knows’ by ‘believes’ in (3)-(5). Thus the Fregean view certainly seems false.

But what exactly is the defect in the Fregean view that allows it to fall prey to counter-examples like Sleigh’s? Another example similar to Sleigh’s may help to answer this question. Suppose that in 2003, before the candidates for the 2004 U.S. presidential election have been chosen, Jones becomes convinced that due to the clearly demonstrated incompetence of the Republican Bush administration, the winner of the 2004 election will be the Democratic candidate, whoever that may turn out to be. Thus we have

(6) Jones believes that the winner of the 2004 election will be the Democratic candidate.

Since of course Bush will in fact be the winner of the election, it follows from (6) by (LTA) that

(7) Jones believes of Bush that he will be the Democratic candidate

But (7) of course seems quite false, since Jones already knows of Bush that he is a Republican, and so he surely would have no belief of the sort that (7) ascribes to him.

The moral of both this and Sleigh’s example would seem to be that *de dicto* ascriptions like (3) and (6) do not ascribe cognitive states that are *about* the referents (if any) of the imbedded small-scope descriptions. The explanation of this fact would in turn seem to be provided by Russell’s theory of descriptions, on which the propositional contents expressed by descriptive sentences like those imbedded in (3) and (6) are general, quantified propositions that are not themselves about any particular objects. (See for instance Russell 1905.)⁵

Russell himself seems to have held that that in order to have a thought that is really about an object, one’s thought must have a content that is expressible by use of what Russell called a ‘logically proper name,’ or by what I shall call a ‘genuine term.’ (See for instance Russell 1912, p. 53.) A genuine term is a singular term whose sole semantic contribution to the propositions expressed by sentences containing the term is simply the term’s *referent*. A sentence containing a genuine term thus expresses a proposition that is a *function* of the term’s referent, if it has one. Or as Russell put it, the proposition will have the term’s referent ‘as a constituent.’ Propositions of this sort are commonly called ‘singular propositions.’

⁵ For a persuasive and thorough defense of Russell’s theory, see Neale 1990.

From a Russellian perspective, the Fregean view's mistake is simply a mistake about *logical form*.⁶ To have a thought about a particular object, it is not sufficient for the thought's content to be a general proposition expressed by use of a definite description that is uniquely satisfied by the object. Rather the thought's content must be a singular proposition that itself is about the object in question. This is the diagnosis of the Fregean view's mistake that I endorse.

2. The Causal Theory

However, there has been another competing diagnosis which has held center-stage since the problem with the Fregean view was first discovered. This competing diagnosis is based on another natural reaction to Sleigh's counterexample, which is to infer that, in order to have thoughts that are really *about* a given object x , one must bear a "closer" or "stronger" relation to x than is provided merely by thinking something of the form 'The F is G' where x happens to be the F. This was Kaplan's reaction in his 1969 paper "Quantifying In," where he proposed substantially the same counterexample to (LTA) as Sleigh had given (Kaplan 1969, p. 220). Kaplan expressed this reaction by suggesting that, in addition to having a descriptively "vivid" mode of referring that denotes a given object of belief, the believer must in some sense also be *en rapport* with the object in question. And in order for a person to be sufficiently *en rapport* with an object to have beliefs about it, he said, the person must have a mode of referring to that object that is somehow *genetically*, or causally, based on the object itself (1969, pp. 225–27).⁷ Kaplan's causal requirement was subsequently endorsed and developed by such philosophers as Evans (1973), Devitt (1974, 1981), Donnellan (1977), Boër and Lycan (1986) and McKay (1984, 1994). The idea is, I believe, still widely endorsed today. (See for instance Perry 2001, pp. 50–52.)

However, after over three decades, Kaplan's idea has failed to bear fruit. No clear, specific account or explanation of the alleged relevant causal relation has ever been stated or suggested. In fact, the idea itself is not just obscure but is also implausible in various ways. First, it cannot be a requirement that is demanded by our *concept* of having an object in mind, or of having a thought that is about an object, that the object be causally related to the thought. For instance, as Kim (1977, p. 618) pointed out, it makes little sense to suppose that when we think

⁶ For a clear and compelling expression of the Russellian perspective, see Boër and Lycan 1986, p. 125.

⁷ In a footnote (note 24, p. 241), Kaplan credits the insights of Saul Kripke and Charles Chastain for his emphasis on genetic factors.

about objects of direct awareness or acquaintance, such as ourselves or our own mental states, acts, or experiences, our thoughts are about these objects by virtue of some *causal* relation between our thoughts and these objects of which we are directly aware. Also, as Kim points out, it does not violate our concept of mental aboutness to suppose that we can have thoughts about abstract objects such as numbers, sets, properties, relations, and word-types. But again, these are not things to which our thoughts could bear any causal relations.⁸

Thus a causal relation can only be a necessary condition of mental reference to objects *other than* objects of acquaintance and abstract objects. But even if the causal view is restricted to thoughts about physical objects in the external world, the view is too strong. As Sosa (1970) pointed out shortly after Kaplan first made his suggestion, if the causal requirement were correct, then no one could ever have beliefs, or be in any other mental states, that are about objects that do not yet exist, but will exist in the future. Yet surely this consequence conflicts with common sense. As Sosa says: “Can’t it be true that there is to be a meeting that I believe will be fruitless? Can’t there be a house which, even when the plans were being drawn, I hoped would please us? And so on.” (1970, p. 889.)

There are also cases where it is clear that a person has a thought about a presently existing object, even though the object has no role in the genesis of the thought. For instance, Blackburn (1984, p. 339) gave the following nice example of this:

... suppose the wife learns that the husband often takes out and adores a handkerchief with traces of the mistress upon it. So she buys a new one, identical except for the marks and substitutes it. She says as she gloatingly learns of his strangled gasp of surprise when he took it out: ‘He expected *it* to have lipstick marks on it!’ She attributes an expectation to the husband relating him *de re* to the substitute handkerchief. But this had no causal influence on the husband’s expectation at all.

Cases of this sort, as well as others,⁹ make it clear, I think, that there is no type of object such that it is a necessary condition of our having thoughts about objects of that type that the objects must bear some special sort of causal relation to the thoughts in question.

Now there could be another, weaker, sort of causal view of thought about objects on which some particular sort of causal relation, while

⁸ I raised a similar difficulty for Devitt’s (1981) causal theory of having an object in mind in my (1983), p. 113.

⁹ See McKinsey 1976a, pp. 129–30.

not a necessary condition of mental reference, at least provides *one* way, among others, of thinking about physical objects. One obvious candidate for such a causal relation is the particular sort that is involved in perception, and I would not deny that in such cases, causation plays a role in determining mental reference. But most causal theorists have also believed that even thoughts about objects of which the thinker is not perceptually aware are often determined to be about those objects by virtue of some special causal relation. So again, perhaps such a causal relation could provide one way (among others) of thinking about objects of which the thinker is neither directly nor perceptually aware. But in the absence of any clear account, or really any account at all, of such a causal relation, it is difficult to evaluate this suggestion.¹⁰

Some philosophers may have been persuaded that at least there *must be* some such causal relation that can determine mental reference, by Donnellan's (1970) and Kripke's (1972) arguments to the effect that speakers can use proper names to refer to objects that uniquely satisfy *none* of the descriptions that speakers associate with the names. (See for instance Kripke's famous Gödel/Schmidt case, 1972, p. 294.) Since it seems in such cases that the speakers would be expressing thoughts about the names' referents, even though these referents are not determined by description, it might also seem likely that some *causal* relation is determining what the thoughts are about. However, I showed in earlier work that these arguments of Donnellan and Kripke simply fail to show that the referents of the names in their cases would uniquely satisfy *none* of the relevant associated descriptions. (See McKinsey, 1976a, 1978a, 1978b, 1981, and 1984. See also Boër 1972, Loar 1976, and Schiffer 1977.)

So there really seems to be no motivation even for the weak view that *some* sort of causal relation provides at least *one* way of thinking about objects of which the speaker is neither directly nor perceptually aware.¹¹

¹⁰ The above paragraph was written in response to a good question asked by Daniel Yeakel.

¹¹ Another initially plausible suggestion as to why in Sleight's and other similar cases the thinker's possession of information that the F exists is insufficient to provide the ability to think *about* the F, is that in all these cases, the thinker fails to *know who* the F is (when the F is a person), or fails to *know what* the F is (when the F is a non-person). (Hintikka 1962 made this suggestion.) However, the apparent fact, persuasively pointed out by (Boër and Lycan 1975), that *knowing-who* is *purpose relative* makes this condition unsuitable as a necessary condition for having thoughts about objects. For it seems clear that one's having a thought about an object is *not* purpose-relative at all.

3. Reference-Fixing by Description

Given the falsity of the Fregean view, and given the fact that no causal relation provides a relevant necessary condition for having thoughts about objects, my view has been that the *minimal condition* that needs to be added to the fact that an agent assumes correctly that just one object is F, in order to guarantee that the agent has a thought or other cognitive attitude that is about the F, is the condition that the agent's thought or other attitude must involve *a mental act of reference that is based on* the agent's (true) assumption that there is just one F. (See McKinsey 1986, 1994.) My explanation of the nature of this kind of mental act is in turn based on an important semantic idea that was first adequately described by Kripke (1972). This is the idea that a proper name or other type of genuine term can have its referent *fixed*, or determined, by a given definite description, without making the relevant term *synonymous* with the description.¹²

Kripke gave several nice examples of reference-fixing by description, but one of the best is that of the planet Neptune, whose existence was discovered solely on the basis of mathematical calculations that in turn were based on observed perturbations in the orbit of Uranus (Kripke 1972, p. 347, n. 33). One of Neptune's discoverers was the French astronomer Leverrier,¹³ who might well have given the planet the name 'Neptune' by means of description, as follows:

- (8) Let 'Neptune' refer to an object x (at any possible world w) if and only if x = the planet that causes Y-perturbations in the orbit of Uranus (in the actual world).

As the parenthetical remarks indicate, Kripke suggested that Leverrier might have introduced 'Neptune' as a "rigid designator" that refers to the same object at every possible world, where this object is to be the planet that causes Y-perturbations in Uranus' orbit *in this world*

¹² Jeshion (2002) has recently defended the idea that reference-fixing by description can provide the basis for *de re* thoughts. While I find Jeshion's view congenial in many respects, her view, unlike mine, requires the use of *names* in thought to explain how *de re* thoughts can be based on description. Jeshion's view also implies that once a (mental) name's reference is fixed by description, a thought involving that name can be about an object which the thinker can no longer correctly describe. I disagree with this aspect of Jeshion's view, though the issue is difficult. Jeshion's idea of mental names whose reference can be fixed by either ostension or description is quite similar to Pollock's concept of a "*de re* representation." See Pollock 1980 and 1982, Chapter III.

¹³ The other was the British astronomer John Couch Adams in 1845, slightly before Leverrier's discovery in 1846. Using information from Leverrier, Neptune was first observed by telescope later in 1846. (*Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia*, 1999.)

(the actual world). Being a rigid designator, 'Neptune' would thus not be *synonymous* with the description that fixes its referent, since that description is *not* a rigid designator. Given that 'Neptune' is rigid, even the following sentence would express only a contingent truth:¹⁴

(9) Neptune causes Y-perturbations in the orbit of Uranus.

My own view is that (9) and other sentences containing 'Neptune' would express *singular propositions* about Neptune. Thus, even though 'Neptune' is introduced by means of description, it is not a description itself; rather it is a genuine term whose sole function is to introduce its referent (the planet) into propositions expressed by use of sentences containing the name. Thus the descriptive content used to fix the name's referent does not "get into" the propositions expressed by use of the name.

While Kripke's examples convinced many that reference-fixing of names by description is certainly *possible*, most were also convinced by Kripke's and Donnellan's arguments that *in general*, names' referents are *not* determined or fixed by description (Donnellan 1970, Kripke 1972). As a result, I think, the idea of reference-fixing by description was not considered to be of much importance in the philosophy of language. But as I mentioned above, I showed that Kripke's and Donnellan's arguments failed to establish that name's referents are typically not determined by description. I have also defended semantic theories of names, indexical pronouns, and natural kind terms on which the semantic referents of these terms are *invariably* fixed or determined by description, and these theories fit all the existing linguistic and intuitive data. (See McKinsey 1978a, 1978b, 1984, 1987 and forthcoming.) So in my view, reference-fixing by description is a widespread and fundamental semantic mechanism.

4. Mental Anaphora and Its Implications

One of the most important applications of the idea of reference-fixing by description is its use in explaining how an analogous phenomenon can occur at the level of *thought*. I call this phenomenon *mental anaphora* (McKinsey 1986). Consider the following cognitive ascription:

¹⁴ Kripke also claimed that, given the introduction of 'Neptune' *via* (8), (9) would be knowable *a priori* even though it is contingent. Donnellan (1977) persuasively criticized Kripke's striking claim. I agree with Donnellan that the proposition expressed by (9) cannot be known *a priori*, but for reasons different from his.

(10) Oscar wishes he had caught the fish that got away.

It's clear that on one of its readings, (10) can be true even though no fish actually got away from Oscar (he had a branch or old boot on the end of his line). It's also clear that on this same reading, the wish ascribed to Oscar by (10) would be *consistent*. To capture this reading, I've proposed that we follow a suggestion made by Geach (1967) for understanding similar cases, and write the relevant reading as follows:

(11) Oscar assumes that just one fish got away, and Oscar wishes it had been the case that he caught it (that very fish).

According to my earlier arguments, the second occurrence of the pronoun 'it' in (11) is neither a bound variable nor going proxy for a description. Rather, the best hypothesis is that 'it' is functioning here as what Evans (1977) called an 'E-type' pronoun, a rigid genuine term whose referent is fixed by the description recoverable from its quantifier antecedent.

Now suppose that just one fish did get away from Oscar at *t*, and call it 'Bubbles.' Since the truth of the singular proposition that Oscar catches Bubbles at *t* would make Oscar's wish come true (at some other possible world), and since the words 'he caught it' in (11) express this proposition, this singular proposition would be the content of the wish ascribed by (11). But then, it surely seems that Oscar's wish would really be *about* Bubbles. But this wish would be about Bubbles merely because Bubbles in fact uniquely satisfies the descriptive assumption on which the mental act involved in Oscar's wish is based.

Thus the existence of mental anaphora shows that thoughts can be about objects, merely by involving mental acts whose referents are fixed by descriptive assumptions that the objects uniquely satisfy. Since there are forms of mental anaphora analogous to (11) involving every type of cognitive attitude, it follows that cognitive attitudes of every type can be about objects merely by virtue of those objects' unique satisfaction of certain descriptions.

The existence of mental anaphora provides strong, positive evidence for a quite liberal view regarding the aboutness of thoughts, a view which we might call the 'Reference-Fixing Theory of Aboutness.' Letting 'C' stand in for any cognitive attitude verb, the various principles that are instances of this theory would all be written as follows:

The Reference-Fixing Theory of Aboutness (RFA)

Necessarily, for any person x , object y , and property G , if there is a property F such that (i) $y =$ the F , and (ii) x assumes that there is just one F , and x Cs that it (that very F) is G , then x Cs of or about y that y is G .

Of course, I am assuming here that clause (ii) is an instance of mental anaphora, so that the pronoun ‘it’ is an E-type pronoun.

Note that while (RFA) is a liberal view, it conforms to the requirement suggested by the Russellian diagnosis of the Fregean view’s mistake. For cognitive states that are about objects because they fit the model provided by (RFA) must all have singular propositions about those objects as their contents.

5. Donnellan’s Objection

In the 1970s, one of the very few philosophers who emphasized the importance of reference-fixing by description, and who as a result endorsed a liberal view of thought about objects, was Kaplan (1977, 1978). In doing so, Kaplan was explicitly taking back his earlier view of “Quantifying In” (1969), on which thought about an object required the thinker to be *en rapport* with the object. In that paper, Kaplan had remarked (pp. 228–29):

... I am unwilling to adopt any theory of proper names which permits me to perform a dubbing in absentia, as by solemnly declaring “I hereby dub the first child to be born in the twenty-second century ‘Newman 1,’” and thus grant myself standing to have beliefs about that as yet unborn child.

But later, as he reports in his paper “Dthat” (1978), Kaplan had become convinced (perhaps by Kripke’s examples?) that a name’s reference can be fixed by *any* description, so that bearing a cognitive attitude toward a singular proposition does *not* require “that the person be *en rapport* with the subject of the proposition” (p. 397). Thus simply by assertively uttering a sentence like

(12) Newman 1 will be bald,

Kaplan had come to believe, he “can assert *of* the first child to be born in the twenty-first century that *he* will be bald ...” (p. 397; his italics).

I of course believe that Kaplan was absolutely right to change his mind.¹⁵ But Donnellan immediately (1977) launched a persuasive counterattack on Kaplan's new liberal view, contending forcefully that one could *not* have knowledge or beliefs *of* the first child to be born in the 21st century, merely by virtue of having dubbed the child 'Newman 1.' Donnellan imagines that the dubbing is performed (say, in 1975), and that eventually the first child of the 21st century is born and baptised 'John.' Donnellan then remarks (p. 20):

Now it seems to me that it would be outrageous to say that some twenty-five years or so before his birth, we knew that John would be the first child born in the 21st century. Suppose one of us, living to a ripe old age, were to meet John after he has grown up a bit. Would it be true to say to John, "I call you 'Newman 1' and Newman 1, I knew some twenty-five years or so before your birth that you would be the first child born in the 21st century"?

Donnellan is claiming here that it would be just *obviously* false to say, for instance,

- (13) In 1975, David knew of Newman 1 that he would be the first child born in the 21st century.

Now everyone can agree that (13) certainly *seems* false. But I want to argue that (13) at least *could* be true (in the circumstances).

¹⁵ Kaplan has more recently clarified his position. See his "Afterthoughts" (1989), p. 605 and note 95, pp. 605–606. Here it is clear that Kaplan still believes that one can fix the reference of a term purely by description, and as a result one can then assert singular propositions and can be in *de dicto* cognitive attitudes toward those singular propositions. But now Kaplan holds that having a *de dicto* belief, say, whose content is a singular proposition about an object is not *sufficient* for having a *de re* belief that is about that object.

I of course believe that Kaplan was wrong about this, but the issues are difficult, and I can't do justice to them here. One very counterintuitive feature of Kaplan's new view is that quantifications into *de dicto* contexts are no longer to be understood as equivalent to, nor sufficient for, any *de re* ascription. For example

(i) $(\exists x) (x = \text{Ortcutt \& Ralph believes that } x \text{ is a spy})$

must now be counted as insufficient to imply

(ii) $(\exists) (x = \text{Ortcutt \& Ralph believes of } x \text{ that } x \text{ is a spy}).$

But it just seems obvious to me that (i) and (ii) are logically equivalent. I would myself in fact *define* both 'believes-of' constructions like (ii), as well as 'believes to be' constructions, by use of quantification into *de dicto* contexts. (See McKinsey 1998, pp. 6–7.)

Another problem for Kaplan's new view is that he apparently must assume that the *de dicto* belief operator used in sentences like (i) must have a different *sense* than the belief operator has in *de re* constructions like (ii). But I have argued elsewhere (1998) that it is both implausible and unnecessary to hold that 'believes' is ambiguous in this way.

But before considering (13) in detail, it will help to first consider a slightly different sort of case, namely, that of ‘Neptune’ and Leverrier. It is interesting that Donnellan says of this case *exactly* what he says about the ‘Newman 1’ case. He imagines that the Neptunians see and hear Leverrier perform his act of dubbing, and they know that their planet is the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus. Donnellan then says, “Would they be justified in concluding that the Earthling has learned or come to know that their planet is the cause? It seems to me that the answer is obviously that they would not” (p. 21). Here, Donnellan is claiming that it would be just obviously false for someone to say

- (14) At t , Leverrier knows of Neptune that it is the planet that causes Y-perturbations in the orbit of Uranus.

(Where t is the time at which Leverrier dubs the planet ‘Neptune.’) But is (14) really false? I think that on the contrary, it is fairly easy to see that (14) is in fact true, and that in the circumstances described, Donnellan’s intuition that (14) would be false is due solely to the fact that saying (14) would conversationally implicate in Grice’s sense various falsehoods that (14) itself does not logically imply. (See Grice 1961, 1975, 1989.)

At the time of dubbing, all Leverrier had done so far is to discover that a unique planet causes Y-perturbations in the orbit of Uranus, and he had decided to call that planet ‘Neptune.’ At this point, it would certainly sound odd to say (14). It would sound even odder to say, as Donnellan imagines, that Leverrier has *learned*, or *come to know*, of Neptune that it is the cause of the relevant perturbations. But the oddity of these ways of speaking is due solely to the fact that they conversationally implicate the falsehood that, prior to the planet’s discovery, Leverrier already had some *other* way or ways of independently identifying Neptune. But as Grice pointed out (1989, p. 44), conversational implicatures can always be consistently *cancelled*. Thus it seems clear that Leverrier would have spoken the truth, had he said right after the dubbing:

- (15) I now do know of Neptune that it is the planet that causes Y-perturbations in the orbit of Uranus, but in fact that is *all* I know about Neptune so far, and the only way I have of identifying Neptune is that it is the planet that causes Y-perturbations in the orbit of Uranus.

Since (15) is obviously true, and (15) entails (14), (14) is also true, contrary to Donnellan's claim. Notice that very shortly later, but before Neptune is observed through a telescope, Leverrier might learn or come to know of Neptune (through additional calculations, say) that it orbits the sun at such-and-such a mean distance, that it is the third largest in mass of the planets, and so on. At this point it seems perfectly natural to say that Leverrier knows these things of Neptune. But this further knowledge is really just additional information of the same type as the information that Leverrier had at the outset. This shows that there is only a difference of *degree* between the later knowledge of Neptune and the knowledge that Leverrier had at the outset. So again, it's clear that Leverrier was in a position at the outset to have knowledge *of* Neptune.¹⁶

The situation regarding Newman 1 is slightly more complicated. In the Leverrier case it is entirely *natural* to suppose that Leverrier would have introduced a name to refer to his newly discovered planet. But by contrast, it is exceedingly *unnatural* to suppose that David (or anyone else) would *ever* introduce a name for the first child to be born in the 21st century. The difference is that Leverrier had every reason to expect that large amounts of new information about the newly discovered planet would shortly and constantly be forthcoming, so that a name would be useful, even necessary, to assert and communicate singular propositions about the planet, and to allow for the effective organization of this information around the object of which the information is true.

But in the Newman 1 case, by contrast, there is absolutely no purpose that is served (except perhaps to "confound the sceptics"¹⁷) by introducing a name for Newman 1, since there is no reason at all to expect any additional information to be forthcoming about the name's referent, and so there is no reason to want to organize this information centered on the referent and no reason to be interested in asserting, communicating, knowing, believing, or thinking of singular propositions about the object in question.

¹⁶ My use of a pragmatic Gricean strategy to defend (RFA) owes much to Sosa's (1970) use of a similar strategy to defend the Fregean view against Sleigh-type counterexamples. In a recent illuminating discussion of Donnellan's argument, Jeshion (2001) has contended, as I just did, that it's possible to give a good explanation of Donnellan's intuitions that is nevertheless consistent with Leverrier's having *de re* thoughts about Neptune. But Jeshion's explanation is significantly different from mine, and does not appeal to Gricean implicature.

¹⁷ As Kaplan puts it (1977, p.560, note 76). In this note, Kaplan is making a similar point to the one I am making here.

With this in mind, let us again consider the possibility that

- (13) In 1975, David knew of Newman 1 that he would be the first child born in the 21st century.

In the absence of any stage-setting, (13) *seems* false because normally it *would* be false. For normally, no one would ever introduce a name for Newman 1, and certainly, no one would ever bother to get themselves into the mental states that are required for (13) to be true. So to evaluate my view that (13) *could* be true in the imagined circumstances, we have to imagine that various quite abnormal things are also true in the imagined circumstances. First, we have to suppose that, while this is highly improbable, it really is true that in 1975, for reasons that are hard to explain, David actually often did assertively and with knowledge utter the sentence

- (16) Newman 1 will be the first child born in the 21st century.

Using mental anaphora, we could describe David's odd state of mind when he utters (16) as being something like this:

- (17) In 1975, David knew that just one child would be born first in the 21st century, and David was then disposed to knowingly judge that he or she (that very child) would be the first child born in the 21st century.

By my principle (RFA) plus (17), it follows that (13) is true in the circumstances.

But now, is it *still* obvious that (13) is false? I don't think so. By describing the circumstances carefully and making clear just how odd and abnormal the situation really is, we have managed to cancel most of the implicatures that a normal use of (13) would have, but which in this case are all false. Thus it is clear that, contrary to what (13) implicates, *all* David knows of Newman 1 is that he will be the child born first in the 21st century, and it is also clear that David has no other independent way of identifying Newman 1. Moreover, the assumption (17) makes clear that while neither having nor expecting any store of additional information that would give him practical reason to have singular thoughts about Newman 1, David has nevertheless (perhaps madly) gone on to have such thoughts *anyway*.

So I think that these considerations show that (13) at least *could* be true in the imagined circumstances, and of course this is all that my Reference-Fixing Theory (RFA) implies. Notice that the difference

between the descriptive knowledge at the basis of (15) in the Leverrier case and the descriptive knowledge at the basis of (13) in the Newman 1 case, is clearly a difference of *degree*, not of kind. Thus there can be no principled reason to agree that (15) is true in the Leverrier case, as it obviously is, while rejecting (13) as false in the Newman 1 case. I suggest that we should think of cases like that of Newman 1 as *limiting cases* of having descriptive information that can serve as the basis of thought about and reference to external objects. It's true that we would in fact never use such limited information as the basis of thought or reference (except perhaps in a philosophical example). But as Kaplan pointed out, the fact that we *would* never use descriptive information of this kind in this way, does not show that we *could not* do so, if we wished (1977, p. 560, n. 76).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to motivate and defend my view that our thoughts about ordinary objects in the external world are frequently based solely on descriptive assumptions. Since my view requires that the propositional contents of thoughts about objects must be singular propositions, the view avoids the counterexamples which refute the Fregean view. It is commonly assumed that, like the Fregean view, my form of description theory also makes it too easy to have thoughts about particular objects. However, I have argued that proposals of stronger conditions, such as the bearing of a causal relation, yield false views precisely because they are too strong. I gave a positive argument for my view by providing linguistic evidence for the existence of mental anaphora, a phenomenon that both illustrates and supports my Reference-Fixing Theory (RFA). Finally, I defended my view against Donnellan's objection by using a Gricean strategy, on which the intuitions of Donnellan and others concerning limiting cases like those of Neptune and Newman 1, are based on false but cancellable conversational implicatures.¹⁸

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¹⁸ For their helpful questions and discussion, I am grateful to the students in my graduate seminar in philosophy of language (Winter Term, 2005), especially Michael Gavin, Mark Reynolds, and Daniel Yeakel. An earlier draft of this paper was presented to the Universities of Waterloo, Western Ontario, Stockholm, and Latvia. I am grateful to the audiences on those occasions for useful discussions, especially to Dan Blair, Daniel Cohnitz, Tim Kenyon, Jurgis Skilters, and Chris Viger.

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