

Objective Reference and Evans' Hybrid View of Singular Thought

How should we understand thought about individual objects? The main contending explanations are descriptivism and acquaintance based theories. The central discussion between the proponents of these views has concerned the determination of the reference of singular thought. Descriptivists argue that the semantics of singular thought should be understood along the lines of hidden definite descriptions. These descriptions single out the unique object of which some description is true as the referent of our singular thoughts. Acquaintance theorists argue that for some singular thoughts the reference is determined by the unique acquaintance relation that exists between the thinker and a particular object, hence no descriptive function forms part of the reference determination.

In "Varieties of Reference" Gareth Evans suggests a view that can best be described as a hybrid between the descriptivist and the acquaintance approach. According to Evans, a successful case of acquaintance based singular thought still requires that the thinker has a conception of the referent as possessing the individuation conditions it in fact possesses. Though Evans' thoughts on the nature of acquaintance relations have been well-received, the hybrid nature of his theory of acquaintance based singular thought is largely ignored or criticized. (Jeshion 2010; Recanati 2012) Importantly, few bother with refuting Evans' arguments in favour of the hybrid view. The most critical voice is properly Burge (2010), which claims that Evans doesn't even produce an argument in its favour. Given the traditional structure of the dispute between descriptivist and acquaintance theorists, one can understand the quick dismissal. Why must a thinker form some conception of the referents of his acquaintance based thinking, when the acquaintance relation is sufficient to determine the semantic value of such thoughts? Isn't Evans account simply a case of the very hyper-intellectualization of reference that acquaintance theories were supposed to free us from?

The purpose of the present paper is to defend Evans hybrid view of singular thought. Simultaneously, I hope to display why many contemporary responses have underestimated, or all together failed to notice, the arguments Evans' presents in its favour. The crucial step is to notice that the motivation for the hybrid view does not originate from concerns over the determination of which object is the reference of singular thought. Rather, it spawns from a concern with how a given case of thinking comes to have objective purport all together. Surely, a unique acquaintance relation between a thinker and a mind-independent object will serve to settle that object as the intended objective referent, if that case of thinking has objective purport that is. To this much Evans agrees. However, I want to suggest that Evans' concern in the passages defending the hybrid view is

with the requirements that must be fulfilled if a mental happening is to have objective purport all together. This view of his arguments also manages to illuminate why Evans considers his defence of the hybrid view to be so closely connected to the seemingly separate generality constraint that he places on conceptual thought.

The core requirement on acquaintance based singular thought is that in order to entertain such a thought one's thinking must in some way be governed by the information delivered by a particular information link. (Recanati 2012) However, the crucial suggestion made by Evans is that our capacity for *objective* singular thought has further requirements. In order to form thoughts about objective reality, a thinker must also have the capacity to employ his singular concept in thoughts that are divorced from the information link that acquaints him with the referent. Hence, in order to, say, demonstratively refer to an experienced object, one must also have some capacity to employ one's singular concept in non-demonstrative thoughts. However, it is clear that what it is to possess this capacity is not something that can be explained solely in terms of how an information link is tied to our practice of judgment. The descriptive sounding element of Evans theory is introduced precisely to account for this element of our complex capacity for forming acquaintance based singular thoughts with objective purport.

Once we realize that Evans concern is not with the determination of reference, but rather with the possibility of objective thought, it is much easier to understand the lack of serious consideration his view has received. Since the onset of externalism of content, the question of why we should at all attribute mind-independent reference to our thinking has been overshadowed by an occupation with how we explain the mechanisms that determine the semantic value of thought and speech. If that is one's concern then a hybrid view does indeed seem unmotivated. However, as long as Evans is motivated by the question of why we should ever take a case of thinking to be about objective reality, then any serious objection to his view must present a variant explanation of what accounts for the objective reference of our mental happenings. Such explanations are sadly absent from many competing accounts; hence the hybrid view is still a strong contender.

Burge, T. (2010) "Origins of Objectivity" Oxford University Press, Oxford

Evans, G (1982) "Varieties of Reference" Ed. John McDowell, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Jeshion, R. (2010) "New Essays on Singular Thought" Oxford University Press, Oxford

Recanati, F (2012) "Mental Files" Oxford University Press, Oxford