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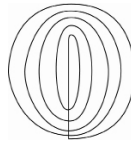
SINGULAR THOUGHT

URI:

from the 2014 EDITION of the

ONLINE COMPANION TO PROBLEMS OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

2012-2015 FCT Project PTDC/FIL-FIL/121209/2010



Edited by
João Branquinho and Ricardo Santos

ISBN: 978-989-8553-22-5

Online Companion to Problems of Analytic Philosophy
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Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa
Alameda da Universidade, Campo Grande, 1600-214 Lisboa

Singular Thought
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Singular Thought

The contemporary debate on singular thought has been shaped by two developments in the 1950s and 1960s. Firstly, Quine's (1956) success in bringing the medieval distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* thoughts and thought-ascriptions back to the attention of the philosophical community. Secondly, the discrediting in the subsequent decade of the descriptivist theories of names and other singular terms suggested by Frege, Russell and their followers in work by Marcus (1961), Donnellan (1966), Kaplan (1989) and Kripke (1980).

Quine pointed out that the report (1) might be interpreted in two different ways, regimented with the help of the language of First-Order Logic as in (2) and (3). Only one of them, the one regimented by (3) — involving “quantifying in” a position embedded in the ascription of a representational state — makes Ralph interesting for the FBI:

- (1) Ralph believes that there are spies.
- (2) Ralph believes that $\exists x(x \text{ is an spy})$.
- (3) $\exists x(\text{Ralph believes that } x \text{ is an spy})$.

Interpreting (1) in accordance with (2), it only ascribes to Ralph a general *de dicto* thought; I will assume that a *de dicto* ascription is one whose embedded clause faithfully captures the content of the ascribed thought. In this case, it is an existential thought that Ralph has perhaps formed on the basis of general considerations about the ways of modern states by reading novels and history books, without getting information about any particular spy. Interpreting (1) in accordance with (3) suggests instead that Ralph has a singular *de re* belief about some or other unspecified individual, to the effect that s/he is a spy.

Marcus, Donnellan, Kripke and Kaplan argued in their turn that singular terms (including definite descriptions, when “referentially” used) are devices of *direct reference*: the thoughts they contribute to express are individuated immediately by their referents, not by an associated descriptive profile that happens to pick them up. To briefly rehearse the considerations by those philosophers, consider Kripke's

deservedly influential points. Even though the descriptive notion the name ‘Kurt Gödel’ evokes for most of us is that he is *whoever proved the incompleteness theorems*, ‘Gödel proved the incompleteness theorems’ has a different modal and epistemic profile than the sentence that results from replacing ‘Gödel’ with ‘whoever proved the incompleteness theorems’: unlike the latter, the former intuitively appears contingent, not necessary, and known *a posteriori*, not *a priori*. Even more compellingly, we can make perfect sense of a slanderous gossip according to which Gödel in fact did not devise the proofs, but stole them from a forgotten colleague of his youth, a certain Smith, whom he then murdered. ‘Gödel’ does not hence pick out its contribution to what is being told in the gossip by the descriptive profile *whoever proved the incompleteness theorems*; for then we would not find the story outrageous, but plainly incoherent.

The two developments bring with them two different, albeit related, routes to a conception of singular thoughts. They are compatible with a *prima facie* natural account, on which a singular thought is an *object-dependent* one — one which depends on an individual object for its individuation: it is about an individual object, and no thought which is not about that object could *be* that very thought. This natural characterization leaves many things open, which the proposals suggested by the two routes take some steps toward closing. I’ll discuss them in reverse order, starting with the one suggested by the *direct reference* route — as I will henceforth call it, distinguishing it from the Quinean *quantifying in* route.

A crucial semantic feature of thoughts is their *intension*: a function yielding their truth-value relative to different *possible worlds*, ways the world might have been. According to Kripke’s (1980, 21) way of putting it, names (and the same can be said about the other singular terms mentioned above) are (*de jure*) *rigid*. An expression rigidly designates *o* just in case its contribution to thoughts expressed with its help when they are evaluated for truth relative to any possible world is never anything but *o*. Ordinary “attributive” uses of descriptions are not like that. When we evaluate the false sentence ‘the first Spaniard to win the Tour de France was born in Cuenca’ at different worlds, we will count it as true at worlds where F. M. Bahamontes — the actual first Spaniard to win the Tour de France — was born in Cuenca rather than being born in Toledo as in fact he

was. However, we might also count it as true with respect to worlds where the actual second Spaniard to win the Tour, Ocaña, who was actually born in Cuenca, is in fact the first Spaniard to win the Tour. The person satisfying the description might differ from possibility to possibility among those at which the expressed thought obtains. It is not like this when we evaluate instead ‘F. M. Bahamontes was born in Cuenca’.

Kripke contrasts the *de jure* rigidity of names with the merely *de facto* rigidity of descriptions such as ‘the smallest prime’, which happen to be constructed from a predicate that applies to the same entity relative to every possible world. He explains that the *de jure* variety occurs when “the reference of a designator is *stipulated* to be a single object” (*op. cit.*). We should at least extend this characterization to cover other cases we will be interested in. It might not be applicable to referentially used descriptions, if the fact that an expression is used referentially is *pragmatic*, not semantic; for it is at the very least awkward to characterize as “stipulated” meanings generated, say, as Gricean conversational implicatures. And it is certainly not applicable to the rigidity of representational devices in mental states.

I will borrow Fine’s (2007, 43) distinction between facts that are semantic *as to topic* and facts that are semantic *as to status* in order to capture a broader kind of which I take Kripke’s notion to be a specific subclass. Facts that are semantic *as to topic* are just those statable in semantic terms (‘truth’, ‘designation’, etc); on Fine’s view, facts that are semantic *as to status* are those among them “which belong to the semantics of a given language”. I propose to generalize Fine’s notion, allowing for “semantic requirements” (Fine 2007, 50) having other sources than the semantics of a given natural language — sources such as whatever accounts for pragmatic meanings, or the meaning of mental states. To the extent that this expansion can be properly philosophically elaborated, we can say that the *de jure* rigidity of names, and the other singular terms mentioned above — in contrast with merely *de facto* rigidity — is then a semantic fact *as to status* concerning those expressions. And a singular thought, on the route suggested by the *direct reference* considerations, is one conveyed by a representational vehicle featuring *de jure* rigid constituents.

This proposal does not characterize singular thoughts directly, but in terms of normative properties of the *vehicles* conveying them. I

will come back to this below; I believe it to be a crucial element of a view hospitable to empty singular representations. A different form of indirectness accrues to the *quantifying in* characterization. Here the idea is that a singular thought is one (*correctly*) ascribable by a *de re* ascription, i.e., one whose “logical form” involves “quantifying in”, as in (3). (Quine added a second semantic criterion for *de re* ascriptions involving singular terms: they allow for the valid substitution of co-referential terms.) This way of characterizing singular thoughts is closely related to the previous one, on the usual assumption that variables are by stipulation referential devices (hence *de jure* rigid), whose semantic profile is exhausted by their designating specific individuals relative to assignments; Quine’s substitutivity criterion supports this, because substitutivity should be a valid principle for expressions signifying their referents.

We should handle the indirection in the second proposal with care, nevertheless; for, according to some views, a subject can be truly ascribed the belief that *p*, without really having a belief with the content that *p*. In an excellent recent study on these issues, however, Hawthorne & Manley (2012, 38) defend that *de re* ascriptions and singular thoughts are connected by the following principle:

Harmony: Any belief-report whose complement clause contains either a singular term or a variable bound from outside by an existential quantifier requires for its truth that the subject have a singular thought.

It has become standard to invoke the metaphor of *mental files* or *dossiers*, initially introduced in Grice (1969), for the singular elements of mental states’ representational vehicles; Recanati (2013) provides a recent book-length discussion. If there is a language of thought, mental files are its singular terms. As I will understand it, talk of mental files has at most the modest ontological commitments that come with adopting a realist attitude towards Folk Psychology; for, as I suggest now, arguably Folk Psychology is committed to something occupying the main role that mental files are supposed to perform.

The inference that something is both *F* and *G* from the premises that *a* is *F* and *a* is *G* is valid and non-enthymematic; the suggestion that it *is* enthymematic — i.e., there is an implicit third identity premise identifying the referent of the subjects of the other two —

would launch us into a regress (cf. Heck 2012, 154-5, and Recanati 2013, 47-50 for recent discussions). The validity of the argument requires that its premises comprise the information that the two subject-terms co-refer. In formal languages like the one I have been relying on in the presentation above, this is conveyed by the use of tokens of the same expression-type. In natural languages, the issue is more complex; in some cases it is the same procedure as in formal languages, in others it is conveyed by the use of a pronoun in a formal relation (*c-command*) with the other expression; in still other cases it is a sheer pragmatic matter. Be this as it may, devices for linking meaning-vehicles for the indicated semantic purpose manifestly exist in natural languages too (cf. García-Carpintero 2004). Similar devices must also exist in the case of mental states, because we do carry such valid inferences in thought. A constitutive job for mental files is that of helping to validly perform inferences in accordance with the anaphoric links just rehearsed, i.e., to help representing objects as-the-same, in Fine's (2007, 40, 68) sense. Thus, someone carrying in thought the inference just mentioned is described as including in the same file the information that the file's referent is *F* and also that it is *G*. To think on two occasions with the help of the same mental file is, by stipulation, to think from a unique perspective on an individual. Pryor (ms) convincingly argues that to properly fulfill this constitutive task, mental files should be understood as relational structures that he characterizes with the help of the mathematical notion of a *graph*.

The two routes to singular thoughts suggest that they are constitutively different from general descriptive thoughts, so much so that there should not be any descriptive element in their semantic individuation. On the Quinean route, the fact that Ralph thinks on the basis of general considerations that there are spies, and — assuming that there is a way of linearly ordering them by size — is in no doubt that there is a shortest one, by itself only appears to validate the ascription (1) in the *de dicto* interpretation (2). On the other route, the Kripkean arguments deploy cases in which a singular thought about *o* is conveyed, even if no descriptive conceptions associated with the name in fact apply to it; Kripke outlined a causal process triggered by a dubbing, a *communication chain*, which might underpin this.

Russell had famously distinguished two opposing forms of being epistemically related to objects, by description and by *acquaintance*. His epistemological assumptions allowed only for a very narrow understanding of the latter relation, but writers following him in thinking that such an epistemic contrast grounds singular thoughts have extended it to encompass “epistemically rewarding” (Recanati 2013, 20, 37) relations binding the thinker with the object of reference, such as causal psychological relations like perception or memory, or even testimony-based transmission of information. Thus, Donnellan (1990, 101, fn.) quotes Russell’s famous contention in the influential chapter “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description” in *The Problems of Philosophy* (p. 30). There, after asking us to consider the use that Bismarck himself makes of ‘Bismarck’ to refer to himself, Russell says: “Here the proper name has the direct use which it always wishes to have, as simply standing for a certain object, and not for a description of the object.” Donnellan embraces this Russellian view, saying, approvingly: “This is the mark of the genuine name; its function is simply to refer without any backing of descriptions, without any Millian connotation or Fregean sense.” Many other writers, including Bach, Recanati, Salmon and Soames have defended similar views. Genoveva Martí (1995, 2007) has clearly articulated the view that a strong form of the theory of direct reference (which I will call ‘Millian’ henceforth) excludes any descriptive features in the semantic characterization of singular thoughts.

Neither route, however, in fact excludes a weaker form of the direct reference view that Martí distinguishes from the strong one (I will call it ‘Fregean’), on which singular thoughts admit a descriptive individuation component, constitutively playing somehow what Kripke (1980) termed a *reference-fixing* role. Consider first the *quantifying in* route. On Kaplan’s (1969) account of the truth-conditions of *de re* ascriptions, the *de re* reading (3) of (1) is more fully represented as in (7’). There, ‘R’ stands for an appropriate representational relation between constituents in belief states and their semantic values, one (perhaps involving *acquaintance*) sustaining correct *de re* ascriptions. The Greek variable ‘ α ’ ranges over vehicles for singular representation in mental states, under the assumption that embedded clauses in attitude ascription characterize such vehicles:

(7') $\exists\alpha \exists x (R(\alpha, x, \text{Ralph}) \wedge \text{Ralph believes that } \alpha \text{ is a spy})$.

On such a view, *de re* ascriptions roughly describe singular thoughts in indefinite terms, existentially quantifying over some of their representational vehicles. This allows for the representational vehicles themselves to involve descriptive aspects. (An omitted complication is that typically some additional information about the vehicles witnessing α is given in *de re* ascriptions, such as that it is for a male, it is demonstrative, etc; cf. Schiffer 1992.)

On the direct reference route, Kaplan's (1989) posits for indexicals *character rules*, such as the one for 'I' that semantically associates with its uses descriptions like "the utterer of this case of 'I'". Discussing them right after the quotation given above, Donnellan says: "This rule, however, does not provide a description which 'I' goes proxy for nor a Fregean sense. It simply "fixes the referent", in Kripke's phrase" (*op. cit.*, 109). His remarks are clearly in tension: genuine reference, according to the previous quotation, is not in any way *backed* by description; reference with cases of 'I' is genuine (this is supported by our two criteria: it is *de jure* rigid, and it validates *de re* ascriptions); reference with cases of 'I' is *fixed* by description. Unless we can substantiate the unexplained difference between 'backing' and 'fixing', it is unclear whether we have a coherent train of thought here.

There are two further indications suggesting that the direct reference route does not by itself support the Millian strong elaboration (as Martí in fact acknowledges). Firstly, the distinction between *deictic* uses of indexicals, whose reference is determined by means of demonstrations, and *anaphoric* uses, determined instead by means of their link to the previous discourse, does not appear to draw a genuine semantic boundary. As Heim & Kratzer (1998, 240) put it, "anaphoric and deictic uses seem to be special cases of the same phenomenon: the pronoun refers to an individual which, for whatever reason, is highly salient at the moment when the pronoun is processed". We should not expect any significant difference in the nature of the thoughts expressed by means of them. Now, in the case of anaphoric uses, what typically makes the individual salient is a descriptive characterization available from previous discourse. Jeshion (2004), Sainsbury (2005, 95-6), and Salmon (2002a, 517-8) also

argue for grouping together both descriptive names (names like ‘Jack the Ripper’, ‘Unabomber’ or Evans’s ‘Julius’, whose reference is determined by an associated description) and ordinary proper names into a single semantic category or linguistic kind.

A second indirect consideration that the direct reference route does not support the Millian view comes from referential uses of descriptions, independently of whether the phenomenon is a non-semantic, “merely pragmatic” one; for once more, there the descriptive information appears to be involved in “fixing the referent”, in spite of its rigid behavior. Now, following Martí (2008), Recanati (2010, 163) argues that referential uses are devices of genuine reference because the descriptive material does not play any role in determining the referent. I think we should follow Sosa (1995) in denying that the descriptive material is irrelevant: it at the very least points to a descriptive conception on which the former epistemically depend, which does fix the referent. On the presuppositional account of reference-fixing I outline below, these cases would be accounted for as involving *accommodation*.

This is the main divide between theorists of singular thought, already established at the start of these debates. It concerns whether descriptive information might nonetheless figure in a full account of its semantic nature. Millian theorists appeal to some extension of Russell’s non-descriptive *acquaintance* relation to account for them; genuine reference is on their view constituted by some relation (perception, memory, testimony) non-descriptively linking subject and object of reference. Fregean theorists are typically *latitudinarians* or *liberals* who reject this, allowing for singular thoughts with a descriptive backing. Hawthorne & Manley (2012) is a book-length recent defense of the liberal view, which Sosa (1970, 1995) had promoted at an earlier stage in the debates. Liberals agree that in some cases — such as the “shortest spy” example above — an ascription of a singular thought might be either pragmatically misleading or plainly false. They, however, provide contextualist accounts, which they claim to be independently motivated: it is just that a *de re* ascription would suggest or entail in the ordinary context that first comes to mind that Ralph has a more interesting characterization of a spy than “the shortest one”.

Along similar lines, Robin Jeshion (2001, 2004) has questioned acquaintance constraints on singular thought, and she (2002, 2010) has developed an “acquaintanceless” account of singular thoughts as an alternative view. Her account of singular thought is a psychological one, rejecting any epistemic requirement. Having singular thoughts is for her a matter of deploying mental files that play a *significant* role in the cognitive life of the individual. Discussing a related suggestion by Kaplan (1969), Sosa (1970, 889-90) made a forceful objection: “... it would make the life of a tourist intolerable. The great majority of the things a tourist comes across are not likely to play major roles in his inner story. Hence, by this account, he could not notice anything about them. But presumably I can see a pagoda to be beautiful or to have six stories even if I had never heard of it before and will soon forget it, and even if I never learn much about it.”

In another interesting piece of work sympathetic to the Fregean approach, Cian Dorr (2011) has provided an elaborated argument that *a priori* knowledge of contingent *de re* propositions is a common phenomenon. He relies on the contention that, in many contexts, claims like this are true: *it is necessary that, whenever one believes that the first Spaniard to win the Tour de France was born in Cuenca, and some person x uniquely is the first Spaniard to win the Tour de France, one believes that x was born in Cuenca*. He calls occurrences of descriptions in attitude ascriptions for which a claim with the same structure is true “exportable” for the relevant attitude: belief, in our example. On the characterization of singular contents ensuing from the *quantifying in* route, such ascriptions are therefore *de re*, and the ascribed attitudes have singular contents.

I myself have also defended in previous work a version of the Fregean, liberal view on singular thoughts (cf. García-Carpintero (2000, 2006), and Maier (2009) and Hunter (2012) for recent linguistic developments of similar ideas). I will conclude by providing a summary of the view. The model for the kind of picture of reference I favor is provided by the previously mentioned *referential* uses of definite descriptions, as when a speaker utters “The younger cat is black”, in the context of a narrative, or in a perceptual setting, intending to bring thereby a particular cat into focus for communicative purposes. In these cases, in order to refer, the speaker typically relies on a way of identifying the referent given by the referential

expression, shared with the audience: the reference is supposed to be a cat, younger than other cats in the scene or in the situation the narrative is about. The example is also intended to illustrate how typically, to properly interpret the speaker linguistic competence is not enough; it has to be supplemented with contextual inferences.

Now, in the previous case the audience might well reply: “It is indeed black, but in fact it is not a cat, it is a small panther”, or even “It is indeed black, but in fact it is not a cat or any other animal, it is just a shadow” (for similar examples, see Sainsbury (2005), ch. 4 and 7). The pronoun ‘it’ in the envisaged responses is an anaphoric referential expression, whose referent is supposed to be picked out from the one for the referential expression used by the first speaker, ‘the younger cat’. However, to make sense of the disagreement that the second speaker expresses, we should abandon the assumption that the referent is determined by the information provided by that description, that the referent is a somehow contextually salient younger cat. This is of course in line with what the Kripkean considerations in the anti-descriptivist argument summarized above. It is also the kind of example Recanati (2010) has in view, in contending that the descriptive material in a referentially used description need not help fixing the referent. How, then, is the referent determined? According to Millians, shared identifying conceptions of the referent are not needed, and even when they are present they do not determine the referent. The referent is rather determined by (non-conceptualized) causal-explanatory relations leading to the use of the referential expression. In our example, there is something that prompted the speaker to use the expression ‘the younger cat’; it is this that he refers to, independently of whether or not it does satisfy the identifying information he linguistically provides.

Nonetheless, there is no convincing Millian account of the facts motivating the descriptivist view, the perspectival character of reference and the possibility of reference without referents. These are still the main considerations for a descriptivist view, even if it should nonetheless incorporate what is correct in the anti-descriptivist picture. I focus first on indexicals, as a model for the correct form of descriptivism. To understand how indexicals work, we must distinguish types from tokens. Haydn’s *Seven Last Words* is one thing (a type), and each concrete performance of it another (a token). The

same distinction applies to words. There is the type ‘yesterday’, and there is also each concrete token of it that we produce in specific utterances. As other linguistic expressions, indexicals like ‘yesterday’ signify linguistically in accordance with general conventions associated with their types. However, those conventions only specify a referent for each concrete token of the type, together with contextual information, which might differ from token to token. For instance, in the case of ‘yesterday’ there is a conventional rule like this:

- (Y) Any token yesterday of the English type ‘yesterday’ refers to the day before that token yesterday was produced.

Given any particular token yesterday occurring in one of our utterances, this rule associates that token with a description, *the day before that token yesterday was produced*. For the case of indexicals, this is still a Frege-Russell view of reference. It is unexpected, in positing what it is usually called (following the German philosopher Hans Reichenbach) a *token-reflexive* description. Without thinking on these issues, probably none of us would come up with the idea that an expression is synonymous with that kind of description. However, this does not mean that the suggestion is at odds with our linguistic intuitions, once we reflect on the matter. Charles Peirce introduced the term ‘indexical’ for expressions like ‘yesterday’, contending that they signify in part in virtue of their “existential” properties; properties like the place or time that they occupy, or who has caused them. And this sounds intuitively plausible. (Traffic signals are also indexical in this sense.) This suggestion is analogous to considering indexicals synonymous with token-reflexive descriptions.

The version of descriptivism that I recommend for proper names also associates them with token-reflexive descriptions, descriptions in terms of “existential” properties of the concrete tokens of proper names we use. This “existential” property features a particular *naming-convention*, which we as speakers contextually rely on when we use proper names. Naming-conventions are a specific part of our linguistic practices; Sainsbury (2005, ch. 3) offers a very detailed account of naming-practices, albeit in the context of a different anti-descriptivist framework. We initiate them in many different ways, a typical one consisting of a “baptism” in which we confer name to

an object. We preserve them also in many different ways, a very typical one consisting in “labeling” the object called by tokens of the name with a particular token (this applies to names for streets, hotel rooms, playhouses, geographical accidents, animals object of biological study, and so on). The linguistic type with which a naming-convention is associated might be loosely identified, because the same naming-practice can be relied on in utterances belonging to different languages, with different phonologies and different spellings. On the other hand, it happens all the time that two tokens of the same linguistic type rely on different, wholly independent naming-conventions. Two different naming-practices might arise with respect to the same individual (‘George Orwell’/‘Eric Blair’). They might even involve the same name-type. The view is then that, in virtue of linguistic rules associated with proper names in general, which have to be applied together with contextually-inferred information, each token *N* of a proper name is linguistically associated with the following description: *the object picked out by the naming-convention on which N relies.*

This is only part of what we need to show that some version of the Frege-Russell view is immune to the criticisms by Kripke that I mentioned above. We also need in addition to invoke the fact that we typically split the content conveyed in an utterance into an “already possessed” and a “new” part. This is illustrated by the contrast between “It is Paolo who owns a Ferrari” vs. “Paolo owns a Ferrari”. The first sentence ends up providing the very same information that can be given by asserting the latter sentence, but it can only be properly uttered in a context in which it is taken for granted, assumed or presupposed that someone owns a Ferrari (cf. the article on presuppositions in this *Compêndio*). This propriety can be cashed out in terms of the idea that the utterance of some expressions or constructions invokes a norm requiring shared knowledge of the “already possessed” content. If the norm fails, this may “wreck” the undertaking constituting the main speech act (to use an expression of one of the first philosophers who pointed out the existence of merely presupposed contents, Peter Strawson). However, we can sometimes “accommodate” the speaker’s failed presupposition; we may even use this to achieve pragmatic effects, as in this dialogue: A: “That woman is very nice” — B: “Yes, his partner would agree with you on that”.

When we use a definite expression, such as the ones we are considering here — proper names, indexicals, definite descriptions — we take for granted that the referent is already “familiar”, that it has been already independently introduced, or that we are in possession of resources to identify it independently. In the example, the second speaker, B, obviously cannot correctly presuppose this; it is not presupposed that the first speaker, A, is already familiar with the partner of the woman he is pointing to, or even with the fact that the woman has a partner. But B justifiably expects that A will act in this case as if this presuppositions of his utterance were satisfied, which requires that A accepts that the woman has a husband; this is just a pragmatic way of communicating this content. To put it in general terms, to accommodate a failed presupposition is to temporarily accept the presupposed content. (Cf. García-Carpintero (2013) for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon.)

On the form of the Fregean view I support, referential expressions trigger (typically, in context) presuppositions. The presupposed content descriptively specifies who or what the referent is; for instance, in the example above, the referent is presupposed to be a contextually younger cat. My view is that the data on which Millians base their criticism can be accounted for as cases of accommodation. In the context described above, the utterance “It is indeed black, but in fact it is not a cat, it is a small panther” does indeed presuppose that the referent of ‘it’ is a cat. However, the audience is intended to pragmatically understand that, given that his assertion explicitly contradicts this, the speaker himself cannot in fact be presupposing this; he should be presupposing something else, which we are expected to accommodate. A natural suggestion is that he is rather presupposing that the referent is the entity that *looked* like a cat to A, or something to the same effect (cf. Sosa 1995). If this is the mechanism that is operating in these cases, their existence does not contradict the (refined) Fregean view, but, on the contrary, supports it; because the mechanism of accommodation relies precisely on expectations based on the speakers’ tacit knowledge of the descriptive assumptions.

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