Normativity and Singular Thought

I will start by examining the following question: what makes a thought singular? We could say, at first glance, that it consists in a thought with singular truth-conditions, or a relation between a subject and a singular proposition. The problem with these definitions, however, is methodological; for we want to define singular thought in such a way that it is not question-begging, that is, that does capture the phenomenon we are trying to explain without presupposing one or another theory used to explain it, and we also want criteria that can be restrictive enough to exclude cases of non-singularity, that can be used to identify and define the phenomenon in question. To begin with, I will identify two sets of theories which can be used to explain it.

One way to approach the problem comes from *acquaintance* theories, motivated by Russell and developed by Gareth Evans (1982). The idea is to take demonstrative thoughts to be paradigmatic, where the subject's thought is said to be 'directly' connected to just one object in the world (the one he perceives), and then proceed on analyzing what is it that the relation affords that makes these cases central to an account of singular thought. But apart from defining singularity in terms of this special relation, Evans' version of it also introduces a normativity requirement for singular thoughts, that is, they are sensitive to a set of rational constraints such that the subject needs to maintain a continuing dispositional connection to the object causally responsible for the thought, without which we would not say we have a case of singularity.

A different way to explore the notion of a singular thought can be seen in recent theories that develop the idea of *mental files* (i.e., Recanati 1993, 2009, Perry 2000, 2001, Jeshion 2002), which are something like 'dossiers' dedicated to collect information about a particular object for which the file was created. As files can be functionally defined as something that plays a certain role in one's psychology, and as they can be created even if no information is yet present in them, these theorists can define singularity just in terms of thoughts that exploit these mechanisms, without depending on any substantial notion of a privileged relation of acquaintance. They are still normatively guided, although no longer by dispositional connections to the object, but by conditions that have to be met by the subject on creating a file in the first place.

What I want to do, first, is to go over some of the merits and disadvantages of both sets of theories. After seeing some of their motivations and explanatory desiderata, I will precise and highlight some notions such as the normativity that guides these thoughts, and the idea of their being 'connected' to an object. Secondly, I will propose a new way of understanding singular thought; on the one hand, I will keep Evans' idea that we can conceive of thought in terms of deployment of certain abilities to integrate information; on the other, I share with the mental file approach the idea that we should unburden the requirement that a privileged relation be instantiated in order for these abilities to be deployed. Ultimately, I will argue that we can explain facts about singularity without mentioning acquaintance relations or being realists about mental files, relying rather on the special kind of normativity which guides these thoughts. To do so, I will borrow notions such as Adrian Cussins' *mundane norms* (2002) and Imogen Dickie's *governance* (2009), and show that both acquaintance and mental file theories fail to take account of important facts about how singular thoughts are connected and rationally constrained by the objects they are about.