

Three Kinds of Singular Thought

Yuki Suda

A “singular thought” is a thought that is obtained when a subject has one particular object in mind. Traditionally, it has been said that singular thoughts must meet one condition, “acquaintance,” which is direct cognitive relationship between the subject and the object of singular thought. This condition was originally proposed by Russell (1917), who first advocated the concept of singular thought. In recent years, however, many philosophers who were influenced by direct reference theory argued that Russell’s acquaintance condition should either be revised or totally rejected. Due to such claims, it is now unclear exactly what a valid and accurate condition of singular thought is. Although many debates and formulations have been made about the concept of singular thought, no accurate consensus has ever been made.

This paper suggests that Russell’s definition of singular thought is not valid enough to give proper conditions for the concept. We should, instead, accept the definition of singular thought Crane (2011) gave: “a singular thought is one that purports to refer to just one object”. To support this suggestion, in this paper, some influential and likely candidates that can give relevant formulations about the concept (linguistic acquaintance theory, causal acquaintance theory, instrumentalism theory, cognitivism theory, and descriptive mental file theory) will be examined. As a result, it will be argued that cognitivism theory or descriptive mental file theory can describe the most appropriate condition for singular thought; we do not have to impose acquaintance as a condition to form singular thoughts. However, it will also be suggested that there are two different kinds of singular thought that work in more restrictive and limited conditions. As a consequence, it will be revealed that there are three different kinds of singular thought, each of which has a unique function. Moreover, if this suggestion is accepted, one benefit will be obtained: we can preserve Russell’s definition as well as Crane’s more limited and restrained definition.