What is a singular proposition?

Ephraim Glick
University of St Andrews
eg35@st-andrews.ac.uk

1   Preliminaries

The notion of a singular proposition has a variety of important applications and connections. It is tied up with questions about actualism and haecceitism (Adams 1981, Stalnaker 2012), presentism (Crisp 2003; Markosian 2004), quantification into attitude clauses (Kaplan 1975), reference and rigidity (Kripke 1972, Soames 2002), acquaintance (Kaplan 1986), perception and hallucination (Burge 1991, Martin 2002), and of course singular ("de re") thought. The latter connections in particular suggest that singular propositions have a central role to play in epistemology and philosophy of mind; Tyler Burge (2007) has argued that de re thought is necessary for language learning, that having any justified empirical beliefs (and hence empirical knowledge) requires having de re thoughts, and that de re thoughts are a prerequisite for the possibility of any thought at all.

But at present, there are some deficiencies in our philosophical understanding of singular propositions. First, the literature contains various accounts of what it is for a proposition to be singular, but these accounts are rarely accompanied by a careful comparison with rivals or even by an explanation of why the account captures the background ideas that motivate drawing a distinction between singular and general propositions in the first place. Indeed, it is often unclear exactly what the background ideas are which would help us gauge the success of an account of singularity. Second, and relatedly, there has been inadequate discussion of the extent to which accounts of singularity and accounts of propositions in general are independent of each other. As we will see, no standard notion of singularity is compatible with certain coarse-grained views of propositions. Drawing the singular / general distinction imposes constraints on our theory of propositions. But in drawing that distinction we should, I will claim, remain as neutral as possible on the nature of propositions.

My project in this paper is to clarify the background ideas that motivate the distinction between singular and general propositions and to advocate a particular analysis of that

distinction. The analysis is a defense and elaboration of ideas from several authors including François Recanati, Robert Adams, and Kent Bach, and offers a concise way of identifying the characteristic feature of singular propositions. The project is not one of conceptual analysis, since singularity is a technical philosophical notion. But my assumption is that there is a genuine, natural distinction that various philosophers have been trying to capture with their talk of singular and general propositions, and this assumption seems a fair one to make given the consensus on how to classify various propositions. For instance, it is generally agreed that if names have a non-descriptive semantics, then sentences employing names (e.g., 'Everest is cold') express singular propositions, and if names have the semantics of purely qualitative definite descriptions, simple sentences employing them (e.g. 'The tallest mountain is cold') express general propositions. In analysing the distinction, I will begin with the vague but suggestive ideas of direct aboutness and of being about an object by way of its properties. The most common way of developing these ideas appeals to structured propositions with objects as constituents. After arguing that we should prefer an account that is more neutral on the metaphysics of propositions, I present and defend a refinement of the original ideas. In the later sections of the paper I consider a variety of competing accounts of singularity, arguing that my preferred account has clear advantages. My hope is that with an adequate account we can feel free to appeal to singular propositions in debating actualism, hacceitism, and so on, though an adequate examination of how different characterizations of singularity would interact with such debates must be left to another occasion.

Before continuing, several points about terminology. First, since my main interest is in the question of what it is for a proposition to be singular, rather than analogous questions about singular thoughts or singular terms, when I use the term 'singularity' I will have in mind a property of propositions unless explicitly indicating otherwise. Second, it will be useful to distinguish an absolute from a relative notion of singularity. Notice that a proposition might be about objects in both of two ways. Suppose (as I will assume throughout) that proper names are referential terms rather than disguised descriptions, and consider the following:

(1) The 43rd US President respects George H.W. Bush.

Does (1) express a singular proposition? The standard answer would be 'yes', but one wants to add: "The proposition is singular with respect to George H.W. Bush, but not singular with respect to the 43rd US President". We can say this if we employ a relative notion of singularity. But then we must ask whether we should try to define an absolute notion of singularity first and derivatively define the relative notion, or do things the other way around. I suggest the latter, giving us the following simple option:

(2) A proposition is singular simpliciter iff it is singular wrt (with respect to) some object.

Since the proposition expressed by (1) is singular wrt H.W., it counts as singular simpliciter. We can define generality in terms of either absolute or relative singularity.

(3) A proposition is general iff it is not singular simpliciter iff it is not singular wrt any object.

Note that this definition of generality means that a sentence in which a description picking out o is used need not express a proposition that is general simpliciter.[1] Whether it does depends on whether the sentence includes certain other devices. Consider the following variation on the example above.

(4) The 43rd US President respects George W. Bush.

Since W. *is* the 43rd US President, someone uttering (4) picks out W. once by description and once by name. Does (4) express a proposition that is singular with respect to W.? We've said that the proposition expressed by (1) is singular wrt H.W. and thus singular simpliciter. It seems that we should similarly say that the proposition expressed by (4) is singular wrt W. and thus singular simpliciter.

Third, throughout my discussion I will be (and already have been) using an intuitive notion of aboutness.[2] This notion does not presuppose the distinction between referential and non-referential terms or the distinction between singular and general propositions. The proposition *that the tallest mountain is over 8,000m* is about Mount Everest in the pre-theoretic sense of 'about', just as much as is the proposition that Mount Everest is over 8,000m. Since only the latter would standardly be considered singular, appealing to aboutness does not unfairly allow us to begin with what we were trying to end up with. And the notion is not without content, as some propositions, e.g. that there are no gold mountains, do not intuitively count as about any particular object. Aboutness, if analyzable at all, cannot be analyzed within the confines of the present paper. But the notion is taken for granted by most authors who offer explanations of singularity, so I can fairly assume it is common ground in what follows. (The reader may note as we proceed that various of the proposals argued against below would have even more immediate problems if they were formulated without use of 'about'.)

Fourth, I will set aside the question of whether it is appropriate to use the term 'singular' to describe the relationship between a proposition and a *property*, rather than an object. There is little if any discussion in the literature of examples such as the proposition that coldness is

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1 I take generality simpliciter to capture what is sometimes described in the literature with the phrase 'purely general' (see, e.g., Markosian (2004: 53)).
2 Cf. Hawthorne and Manley (4).

unpleasant. Is this singular wrt coldness? Perhaps a distinction is called for here, as there is a contrast between the proposition that coldness is unpleasant and the proposition that the property that causes shivering is unpleasant. But if the former is singular wrt coldness, what about the proposition that ice is cold? Coldness is predicatively involved in this proposition (to put it vaguely), but the relationship between the proposition and the property doesn't seem "indirect" in the way it does in the case of the proposition that the property that causes shivering is unpleasant. Rather than attempting to deal with these issues at length here (interesting though I think they are), I will restrict the terms 'singular', 'general', and 'about' to uses where they describe the relationships between propositions and particulars. I will describe the role of properties by saying, e.g., that all the propositions mentioned above "concern" the property of coldness. (See below for more on *concerning*.)

2 Direct aboutness and non-qualitativeness

Now, a particularly simple attempt to define singularity might appeal only to a notion of aboutness: a singular proposition is a proposition about a particular object (or objects), whereas a general proposition isn't about any particular object. Or perhaps 'about' might be replaced by 'involves', as when Recanati (2010: 142) writes that a singular proposition is "a proposition involving individual objects as well as properties". Probably Recanati doesn't intend this as a serious explanation of singularity, but in any case, he cannot be appealing to the pre-theoretic notion of aboutness that many other philosophers appeal to. The proposition *that the tallest mountain is cold* counts by everyday criteria as about Mount Everest (assuming we're restricting our attention to Earthly mountains), but if we classify that proposition as singular wrt Mount Everest, we've certainly failed to capture the phenomena philosophers have been aiming at.

A more plausible interpretation of 'involves' would take it to be a technical term that required some closer connection between the proposition and the object. This is commonly indicated explicitly when authors write of a proposition being "directly about" or "directly involving" an object. For example, Alvin Plantinga writes: "I shall say that a proposition directly about some object is a singular proposition" (1983: 3). He cites Arthur Prior as his source for the phrase,[3] but it was used in Prior's sense decades earlier (e.g., in Langford 1929). While 'directly about' may be suggestive, it isn't particularly clear. What is the connection supposed to be between an object and the proposition that is directly about it? A helpful elaboration is given by Robert Adams, who states that "A singular proposition is, roughly, a proposition that involves or refers to an individual directly, and not by way of its qualitative properties or its relations to another individual" (1981: 6). Here Adams not only specifies that the way in which

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3 The passage of Prior's that Plantinga seems to have had in mind is this: "Some time ago I proposed, and gave a matrix for, a modal system Q in which it is assumed that in certain worlds certain propositions simply do not occur, because they are directly about individuals which are absent from those worlds" (1977: 84).

the proposition involves the individual must be direct, but he includes a clause intended to point to the relevant contrast. Similarly, Recanati contrasts being "directly" about objects with being about objects "indirectly, qua bearers of such and such properties" (2010: 142). As a first pass, we might try to state the idea as follows:

> DIRECT ABOUTNESS (DA): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff p is directly about o, not merely about o in virtue of o's properties.[4]

I believe this thesis points in the right direction, but we should not be content with its lack of clarity. What is it for a proposition to be about an object *in virtue of the object's properties*, or *by way of* those properties? We can bring out the lack of clarity by noting a possible objection: *Whenever* a proposition (or sentence or thought) is about an object o, it is about o in virtue of o's properties, so no proposition will count as singular according to (DA). To see this note that as long as there is some answer to the question 'In virtue of what is p about o?', the answer will be in terms of properties of o. For instance, take the view (discussed in more detail below) that propositions are "Russellian" structured complexes with objects as constituents. In virtue of what is a Russellian proposition about Socrates? According to Salmon:

> A *singular proposition* is a proposition that is about one of its own components by virtue of containing it. If *p* is a singular proposition about an object or individual *x*, then the component in virtue of which *p* is about *x* is simply *x* itself and the proposition is about *x* by containing *x* directly as a constituent. (2005b: 291)

So let p be a proposition about o that is singular wrt o. Then, if the Russellian view of propositions is correct, p is about o in virtue of o being a constituent of p. And of course, *being a constituent of p* is a property of o. So it seems that p is about o in virtue of o's properties, and thus fails to satisfy the last clause of (DA). This contradicts our assumption that p is singular wrt o.[5] A similar problem could be posed using other theories of propositions, but it is worrying enough to note that (DA) immediately rules out a view of propositions that is not only common, but is commonly taken to provide the most straightforward way to distinguish singular from general propositions (see the discussion of (AC) below).

Perhaps proponents of (DA) would not want to count the Russellian idea as one according to which a proposition is about an object *in virtue of that object's properties*. But then what would

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4 All theses discussed should be necessitated biconditionals, but I ignore this for simplicity.
5 This point illustrates the need for clarification of another influential account of singularity, but in this case singularity of thoughts. Kent Bach (1987), though denying the existence of singular *propositions*, proposes that a de re thought is one whose connection to the object it's about is *relational* rather than *satisfactional*. My worry for (DA) applies here, too: The object to which a singular thought has a *relational* connection will be whatever object satisfies some condition (perhaps, e.g., a causal connection). So in exactly what sense is the connection not satisfactional? See discussion below.

be the right way to understand that expression? The idea could be that the *way* the object's properties are relevant for singular propositions is different from the way they are relevant for general propositions. We could emphasize Recanati's use of 'qua', saying that a proposition about o that is general wrt o is a proposition that is merely about o *qua* bearer of such and such properties. Singularity would then be defined in contrast – a proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff p is not general wrt o. Spelling that out gives us this:

> NON-QUALITATIVENESS (NQ): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff, though p is about o, p is not about o merely qua possessor of certain properties.[6]

This thesis, I believe, offers a fair restatement of the idea behind Recanati's and Adams' comments, as well as connecting with others' explicit talk of "directness". We way want some further clarification, as (NQ) relies critically on the unexplained use of 'qua', but the thesis has its virtues. To begin with, it feels like a fair description of the difference between the propositions that Everest is cold and that the tallest mountain is cold – both are about Everest in some sense, but the latter is about Everest qua possessor of the property of being the tallest mountain. The former manages to be about Everest without being about it in that way. Beyond having this initial benefit, (NQ) also reflects well the intuitive considerations that various authors have put forward in their discussions of singularity. For instance, in their survey article, Michael Nelson and Greg Fitch (2009) appeal to previous work by Strawson in setting out what they call the "reduplication argument" for the existence of singular propositions. Simplified a bit, the idea is the following.

Imagine that the universe is totally symmetrical across a given plane. On either side there are exactly qualitatively similar regions containing exactly similar distributions of matter and properties. On one side of the plane are Mary and her brother John, and far away on the other side are Mary' and her brother John'. Mary and Mary' each have a thought and express it by saying "John is nice". The relevant datum is that Mary is talking and thinking about one individual, while Mary' is talking and thinking about a different individual. But those individuals are qualitatively identical, as are all things around them. So Mary and Mary' cannot be picking out their respective brothers merely as whoever possesses certain properties.[7] Even more obviously, if Mary and Mary' each have a thought they express by saying "I'm hungry",

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6 Regarding the negative character of this definition, see the discussion of (AP) below.

7 Actually, the conclusion should be that Mary and Mary' are not picking out their brothers using purely qualitative properties. They could be picking their brothers using properties defined in terms of other individuals, e.g. spacetime points. But in that case, there would still be some objects (the spacetime points) that Mary and Mary' are talking or thinking about without talking or thinking about them as whatever has certain properties. A similar point applies in the 'I'm hungry' case – someone might claim that Mary's thought is best expressed as "the thinker of *this* thought is hungry". That would still establish that Mary is thinking about something (her thought) non-qualitatively, since otherwise she couldn't pick out her own thought rather than that of Mary'.

Mary is thinking and talking about Mary while Mary' is thinking and talking about Mary'. Their thoughts and utterances, and so the contents thereof, must not be about Mary and Mary' merely by way of their qualitative properties, for otherwise they could not be determinately about only one of the two individuals. Now, our universe may not be symmetrical. But if we would be able to talk or think non-qualitatively about someone were our universe symmetrical, nothing should stop us from talking or thinking non-qualitatively about someone as things really are. So since the symmetrical universe is possible, the phenomenon of non-qualitativeness is actual. There are thoughts and utterances whose objects are not picked out qualitatively. Their contents are singular propositions.

I think (NQ) captures in slogan form the idea behind the reduplication argument. It also nicely reflects some related ideas in the literature. Kit Fine (1977) develops a formal metaphysics of properties and propositions in which he attempts to characterize a proposition's being purely general.[8] The contrasting sort of proposition, though Fine doesn't call it this, is just a singular proposition. The contrast is drawn in terms of an "automorphism", a permutation of individuals and worlds that "systematically correlates each world with a qualitative counterpart" (132). A singular proposition is then one that distinguishes between two worlds that are qualitative counterparts. A related idea appears in C.H. Langford's early piece, "Propositions Directly about Particulars", in which singular facts and propositions are taken to be ones which can differ from another merely numerically, despite being qualitatively identical. Fine's idea is also connected to an idea in the background of Adams' discussion of propositions "directly about" objects – Adams is interested in whether there could be a pair of worlds that were qualitatively identical but that differed merely in which non-actual individuals they contained. He writes: "If there were singular propositions about non-actual individuals, possibilities for non-actual individuals could be founded on them" (7). The connection to Nelson and Fitch's argument is, I think, evident. Authors focused on singular (de re) thought rather than propositions per se also sometimes set up their discussions in terms of qualitativeness. Kent Bach writes:

> If you could not have de re thoughts about things in the world, you could think of them only by description, each merely as something of a certain sort. If all your thoughts about things could only be descriptive, your total conception of the world would be merely qualitative. (1987: 11)

In that case, you couldn't have a thought that distinguished between two situations that were qualitative duplicates of each other. The data revealed in Nelson and Fitch's thought experiment could not be possible.

The common element in the discussions of all the above authors is the connection between

8 Thanks to Bryan Pickel for the reference.

singularity and non-qualitativeness. If thinkers have ways of thinking about objects without thinking of them qua possessors of certain properties, then, we say, those thinkers can have singular thoughts with singular propositions as contents. I want to suggest that (NQ) be taken as an informal statement of this idea, and if we want our account of singularity to reflect the philosophical motivations for employing the distinction between singular and general propositions, then we should aim to do justice to (NQ).

Why not simply take Fine's idea of automorphisms to provide our elaboration of (NQ) and account of singularity? We would need to go into more detail about the sense in which a singular proposition would distinguish between qualitatively identical worlds (Fine says that a purely general proposition "contains any world isomorphic to one of its members"), but the rough idea would be this:

> FINE SINGULARITY (FS): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff p distinguishes between a pair of worlds w and w' such that w contains o, w' contains an object o' instead of o, but w and w' are qualitatively identical.

If we could make sense of qualitative duplicates of abstract objects, then Fine's idea would certainly be worth further consideration. But as hard as it is to imagine there being two qualitatively identical worlds that differ in which physical objects they contain, it is even harder to imagine there being two worlds that contain numerically distinct but qualitatively identical abstract objects. This is important because propositions can be singular wrt abstract objects (e.g. the proposition that pi is an interesting number), and as we will see, this fact causes major problems for some accounts of singularity. We cannot simply set aside all cases of propositions about numbers, sets, and so on, so if Fine's idea were to work, we would need to have one world containing pi and another world containing a qualitative duplicate of pi. I cannot make sense of that suggestion.[9]

So, having struck on (NQ) as a to-be-clarified characterization of singularity, where do we turn from here? We could attempt to spell out what it is to be about an object "qua" possessor of certain properties. This is what I will do later on. But first, let's consider an alternative: We could focus on what happens when a proposition is about an object *without* being about it qua possessor of certain properties – if it's about it in some other, more "direct" way, what is that? It is interesting to note that while Plantinga cites Prior for his use of the phrase "directly about",

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9 It is worth noting the role of 'about' in (FS). Suppose p distinguishes between w and w', where those worlds are qualitatively identical but differ in whether they contain o or o'. As a referee points out, that is consistent with p not being singular wrt o, because p might not be about o at all, but rather about a proper part of o (or indeed any other object that exists in only one of the two worlds but has a qualitative duplicate at the other world). The proper part problem doesn't seem avoidable by specifying that the pair of worlds differ *only* in whether they contain o or o', since if o and o' are composite objects, they may need to have parts that are distinct but qualitatively exactly similar.

he doesn't mention that elsewhere Prior says in more detail what he had in mind: "What a sentence is directly about enters into its very meaning, whereas what it is indirectly about does not" (1971: 160). Taking names and descriptions to provide the contrast between direct and indirect aboutness, respectively, he says:

> In the case of a sentence containing a name, what the sentence is about is part of the sentence's meaning; but where the sentence only contains a description, what the description applies to is no part of the sentence's meaning, no part of what is said. (1971: 159)

This explanation of direct aboutness leads us to one of the most common contemporary ideas about singularity.

3   Constituency and metaphysical neutrality

According to Kaplan, sentences containing directly referential terms have singular propositions as their contents. He describes these contents as follows:

> If I may wax metaphysical in order to fix an image, let us think of the vehicles of evaluation — the what-is-said in a given context — as propositions. Don't think of propositions as sets of possible worlds, but rather as structured entities looking something like the sentences which express them. For each occurrence of a singular term in a sentence there will be a corresponding constituent in the proposition expressed. The constituent of the proposition determines, for each circumstance of evaluation, the object relevant to evaluating the proposition in that circumstance. In general, the constituent of the proposition will be some sort of complex, constructed from various attributes by logical composition. But in the case of a singular term which is directly referential, the constituent of the proposition is just the object itself. Thus it is that it does not just turn out that the constituent determines the same object in every circumstance, the constituent (corresponding to a rigid designator) just is the object. There is no determining to do at all. (Kaplan 1989: 494)

This characterization of singular propositions is one Kaplan repeats elsewhere: "Let us adopt the terminology *singular proposition* for those (purported) propositions which contain individuals as immediate constituents, and *general proposition* for the others" (Kaplan 1975: 724).   This is commonly endorsed by other contemporary authors, as when Nathan Salmon writes that singular propositions are "structured propositions directly about some individual, which occurs directly as a constituent of the proposition" (Salmon 1990: 217).[10] We can represent these structured propositions with angle brackets, e.g. ⟨ *o, F-ness* ⟩ is the proposition that *o* is *F*, a proposition that has *o* as a constituent.

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10 See also (Salmon 2005c: 207), (Salmon 2005b: 291), and (King 2014).

Often, singularity is defined not simply by saying that the proposition contains the individual and is directly about the individual, but by saying that it is directly about the individual *by* or *in virtue of* containing it. For example, Kaplan describes Russell's view as follows: "There are propositions (call them *singular*) that attribute properties directly to an individual, by having the individual itself occupy the subject place in the proposition" (Kaplan 1986: 239). Nelson and Fitch (2009) write, "Singular propositions (also called 'Russellian propositions') are propositions that are about a particular individual in virtue of having that individual as a direct constituent."[11] We can state the proposal as follows.

> ABOUTNESS BY CONSTITUENCY (AC): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff p is about o in virtue of o's occurring as an immediate constituent of p.

I have included 'immediate constituent' instead of simply 'constituent', following several of the quotes above, but I won't offer an explanation of constituency on behalf of (AC)'s defenders. There may be some initial worries there, but I don't see them as gaining much traction against (AC) in the end, so I set the issue aside here.[12] In fact, I don't purport to have a knock-down objection to (AC). If propositions are in fact structured objects, then (AC) may be extensionally adequate, and it does offer a clear suggestion for capturing the idea behind (NQ) – the appearance of Socrates himself within ⟨ Socrates, *tallness* ⟩ shows us that the content of the proposition doesn't merely give us properties we can use to pick out Socrates. The proposition isn't about him qua possessor of certain qualities. But despite finding (AC) more reasonable than various proposals to be discussed below, I don't think we should accept it as an account of what singularity is. We should hope to characterise the singular / general distinction in a more neutral way consistent with various views on the metaphysics of propositions, e.g. de re senses, unstructured sets of some sort, mental act types, or sui generis abstracta.

Why favor a neutral account of singularity? There are two main reasons. First, we've seen that there is a basic idea that all accounts of singularity should aim to capture, (NQ), and *that* idea is statable independently of any theory of the metaphysics of propositions. So if it is possible to capture that idea more precisely without such a theory, then choosing a formulation of the idea confined to some particular theory of propositions would be to stick our necks out unnecessarily while preventing other theorists from making use of the notions being

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11 Note the use by Nelson and Fitch, as well as Salmon, of 'about'.

12 Others have worried, however. Plantinga (1983: 9) complains, "It's not at all clear what is being claimed when it is claimed that propositions have constituents. Insofar as we have a grasp of that notion, however, it is very hard to see how a person could be a constituent of a proposition." For more specific concerns about how to characterise constituency, see Armstrong and Stanley (2011). For positive suggestions, see Hawthorne and Manley (2012: 14) and (King 2014).

explicated.[13] There is thus a practical reason for searching for a neutral alternative to (AC).

Second, the notion of a singular proposition seems of a kind with other notions for which it would be inappropriate to offer explanations that presupposed a particular metaphysics of propositions. Suppose, as might well happen, that we had a use for a notion of a quantificational proposition, and so we aimed to give an account of what it is for a proposition to be quantificational. If we favoured a Russellian structured-proposition view, we could say something like this: A quantificational proposition is one whose immediate constituents are a property or pair of properties and a certain sort of higher-order relation or function. But this seems a bit theoretically loaded. It would be fair to hope that a notion like *quantificational proposition* could be explained without presupposing a controversial metaphysics of propositions. In the same vein, one might think of the notion of a negative proposition, or a modal proposition. In the case of singularity, too, it is reasonable to hope that we could explain this property of propositions without building in a controversial metaphysics. Indeed, by making (NQ) more precise, we will end up below with an example of such a neutral theory. The notion of a singular proposition is not a metaphysical notion, but a semantic notion.[14]

Two clarifications: First, I definitely do not assume that an explanation of singularity should be compatible with *any* theory of propositions. There may be principled reasons that some theories are incapable of capturing the standard notion of a singular proposition, and we will see below that this turns out to be true of the view that propositions are sets of possible worlds. But that is compatible with the claim that our explanation should be as neutral as possible. If the proposal below is adequate, that shows that it is unnecessary to assume, e.g., that propositions have structures and constituents, but also unnecessary to assume the opposite.

Second, I cannot say much at the outset to convert the theorist who already suspects that the hope for a fairly neutral theory of singularity will prove totally unsatisfiable. But there is no reason to be so skeptical from the outset. We often expect questions of the form 'What is it for an *F* to be *G*?' to be answerable without an answer to the prior question 'What is an *F*?' For instance, we can consider what it is for an action to be morally required without giving an account of what an action is. We can debate what it is for a belief to be epistemically justified without giving an account of what a belief is. And we can investigate what it is for a physical object to be coloured without giving an account of what a physical object is. For each of these pairs of properties F and G, the fact that Fs can be G might put constraints on an adequate

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13 I thus disagree with Joshua Armstrong and Jason Stanley's claim that "One decided advantage of the framework of Russellian Structured propositions is that it promises to provide a metaphysical basis for the notion of a singular thought about an object, grounding it in terms of constituency" (206). That is not an advantage but a mistake.

14 Cf. Hawthorne and Manley (2012: 15): "We doubt that metaphysical speculations about the structure of propositions are a promising place to start when thinking about the referential structure of language and singular thought." Related comments can be found in (Kaplan 1989: 493 fn 17) and (Stalnaker 1988: 160).

account of F-hood, but a full account still shouldn't be a prerequisite to an account of G-hood. Perhaps only things with representational content can be epistemically justified, so any account of belief must be compatible with beliefs having representational content. But an account of justification seems like it could be independent of whether belief should be analysed in, say, functionalist terms. So returning to our topic, to explain what it is for a proposition to be singular does not *prima facie* require an answer to the question of what a proposition is.

4   A neutral characterization of singularity

We have just been exploring an attempt to use the notion of a propositional constituent to explain the sense in which a proposition could be directly about an object. An alternative approach is to return to (NQ) and attempt to explain what it is for a proposition to be about an object qua possessor of a property. Direct aboutness could then be understood in contrast – to be directly about an object is to be about it without being about it merely qua possessor of a property. If we consider other domains in which it is natural to talk of directness, this sort of negative explanation of directness often seems more promising than a positive explanation. For example, take metaphysical grounding. A natural proposal about what it is for A to be directly grounded in C is this: A is grounded in C and *it's not the case that* there is an intermediate B such that A is grounded in B and B is grounded in C. To take a more everyday example, to communicate something directly to X is to communicate it to X *without* communicating it to an intermediate Y who then communicates it to X.

When we turn to singularity, the analogies with grounding and communicating won't be exact, but the idea is clear enough to get us started. (NQ) recommends that we think of indirect aboutness in terms of whether the properties of an object play a sort of intermediate role between the proposition and the object. As we saw in discussing (DA), the intermediate status of the properties isn't adequately characterized by saying that the proposition is about the object in virtue of the object's properties. Rather, there seems to be something important in the idea that the proposition is about the object *qua* possessor of those properties. The relationship between the properties and the object is straightforward: the properties are satisfied by the object. But the relationship between the proposition and the properties requires further comment.

If we want to say that the proposition *that the tallest mountain is cold* is about Everest qua tallest mountain, unlike the proposition *that Everest is cold*, then we should also contrast the former proposition with the proposition that *the most massive mountain is cold*, since the latter is about Everest but not about it qua tallest mountain. (Suppose Everest is both the tallest and the most massive mountain.) Setting aside direct aboutness for the moment, we can consider

the difference between those two propositions.[15]

  (5) a. The tallest mountain is cold.
       b. The most massive mountain is cold.

The propositions expressed by (5a) and (5b) are both about Everest, but are about it qua possessor of different properties. How can we explain this use of 'qua'? We can start by taking for granted that propositions can not only be about objects, but concern properties and relations as well. (5a) and (5b) concern coldness and mountainhood. The proposition that Bush paints concerns the property of painting, and the proposition that there is a philosophizing politician concerns the properties of philosophizing and of being a politician. None of these propositions concern doghood or the property of being made of plastic. I mean to be using an informal notion of *concerning* that is analogous to the informal notion of aboutness, but pertains to properties rather than particulars. As with aboutness, we can get enough of an intuitive grip on concerning that an explanation relying on that notion can be illuminating even without a definition of it.

Though I won't offer a definition, I can state a heuristic that should make it even more obvious which propositions concern which properties. Let '*F*' be a predicate expressing property P and let '*Fness*' be a noun referring to P. Then a proposition q concerns P iff q is expressed by a sentence at least one word of which is either '*F*' or '*Fness*'. This is merely a heuristic because a proposition's concerning a property needn't essentially involve anything linguistic. Compare: It would be an unsatisfying, and perhaps extensionally incorrect, definition of aboutness to say that a proposition is about an object iff the proposition is expressed by a sentence in which at least one expression denotes the object. The appeal to linguistic items seems out of place when we were looking for a relation between a proposition and an object. And of course we might want to leave open the possibility that there are ineffable propositions that are about various objects or concern various properties.[16]

Now return to the idea that (5a) and (5b) are about Everest, but about Everest qua possessor of different properties. How can we replace the 'qua'-talk with something clearer? To begin with, we should note that (5a) and (5b) concern different properties. Moreover, since Everest is

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15Thanks to Katherine Hawley for suggestions here.
16 I intend my use of the term 'concern' to be as neutral as possible on the metaphysics of propositions. What about very coarsegrained, unstructured views of propositions? Even proponents of such views seem comfortable writing of propositions *attributing properties* to objects. For example, writing of a given individual and attribute, Stalnaker refers to "the proposition that attributes the attribute to the individual" (2009: 237). I am not sure Stalnaker is entitled to use this sort of terminology, however; see the end of the below discussion of (FV). The more general point, though, is that having structured propositions is independent of having a notion of a proposition concerning a property. One could have a finer-grained view than Stalnaker's on which propositions are sets of situations or perhaps sets of possible and impossible worlds, or even a view on which propositions are sui generis abstracta.

(we're assuming) the tallest and most massive mountain, the propositions concern different properties *of Everest*. And crucially, of course, the properties are each *uniquely* possessed by Everest – it is by exploiting that fact that (5a) and (5b) get to be about Everest. So instead of saying that the propositions are about Everest qua possessor of different properties, we say that it is by concerning different properties of Everest that the propositions get to be about Everest. This clarifies the *qua*-talk a bit by cashing it out in terms of which properties of Everest the proposition concerns.

If we turn now to the proposition that Everest is cold, we can easily state the difference between this proposition and the one expressed by (5a): the latter, but not the former, gets to be about Everest by concerning a property of Everest.[17] If the proposition that Everest is cold is true, then it concerns a property of Everest, coldness, but it is about Everest independently. The proposition that the tallest mountain is cold concerns coldness as well as another property of Everest, being a mountain taller than any other, and it is by concerning the latter property that the proposition gets to be about Everest. This is the key to the distinction between singular aboutness and general aboutness. We can state our characterization of singularity as follows.

> ABOUTNESS BY PROPERTIES (AP): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff p is about o, but not merely about o by concerning one or more properties of o.

The qualification 'merely' is meant to allow for cases like (4), where a proposition is about an object twice-over – (4) is about George H.W. Bush by concerning one of his properties, but it is also about him independently of concerning his properties. When applying (AP) to simple propositions, 'merely' can be ignored.

An initial benefit of this account of singularity is that, unlike (AC), it captures the phenomenon without presupposing any controversial metaphysics of propositions. It could be adopted within various metaphysical frameworks, however, since everyone should accept our assumption that propositions can be about objects and properties. Someone who favours Russellian propositions, for instance, will find no conflict between (AP) and their notion of representation by constituency. Equally, (AP) could be unproblematically adapted within

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17 This strategy for characterizing singularity resembles that of Bach, who elaborates his notions of relationality and satisfactionality (mentioned in an earlier footnote) by writing that a singular thought about an object "does not have to represent its being in that relation to the object" (2010 :55). Bach himself rejects singular propositions, but (AP) below could serve for others as a transposition of his ideas from the domain of singular thoughts to propositions. Two other points of departure: Bach thinks of token thoughts as built out of representational vehicles, whereas a proposition is not, as far as I'm assuming here, built out of representational vehicles. If a proposition is something like a set of situations, or a sui generis entity, it might be a representation in a different sense than the sense in which a token concept is a representation. (I'm not sure everyone in this literature would be comfortable calling propositions "representations" at all.) Nevertheless, I'm assuming that they can be about or concern particulars as well as properties. Second, I think even a *general* proposition needn't "represent" its being in a relation to the object its about – it needn't "represent" anything about itself, and doesn't in the usual case.

theories according to which propositions are sui generis entities or mental act types.

An even more significant benefit of (AP) is the way in which it connects with the motivating ideas behind discussions of singularity. It provides a simple way of clarifying (NQ), and (NQ) reflects attractive ideas from Recanati, Adams, Nelson and Fitch, Fine, and others. It explains why the reduplication argument would be taken to establish the existence of singular propositions, as the conclusion of the argument is that there are contents that are about objects without being about them purely qua possessors of certain properties. (Mary and Mary' are able to talk and think about themselves and about the individuals in front of them despite the qualitative duplicates on the other side of the universe.) (AP) also fits nicely with other considerations that have led philosophers to accept singular propositions.[18] Consider, for instance, the influential work of Kripke and Kaplan. Both authors point to data indicating that certain terms have non-descriptive contents. Indexicals, for instance, while being associated with conditions like *being the speaker of the context* or *being the addressee of the context*, still don't have those conditions as their contents. When we make an utterance using such a non-descriptive term, we pick out an individual without the content expressed providing any criterion that does so. John Perry's work on indexicals has led some philosophers to similar conclusions. Heimson and Hume, even if sharing all their qualitative beliefs about themselves, still differ in who they think about when they have first-personal attitudes. They must not, it seems, be thinking of themselves merely as whoever satisfies certain qualitative conditions.

It may be worth briefly noting how (AP) avoids a problem raised earlier for (DA). (DA) relied on the idea that a general proposition is about an object *in virtue of* that object's properties, and we noted that too many propositions would satisfy that description. According to theories like Salmon's, even a structured proposition with an object as a constituent, e.g. < o, *tallness* >, is about the object in virtue of the object's properties (namely, being a constituent of the proposition). On the improved proposal (AP), < o, *tallness* > does not count as a general proposition about o. (AP) allows that < o, *tallness* > is about o in virtue of o being a constituent of the proposition, but the proposition would only be general if it *concerned* o's property of being a constituent of the proposition. But it does not. The only property it concerns is tallness.

Further advantages of (AP) are revealed when we consider the prospects for other metaphysically neutral accounts of singularity. These competitors struggle with phenomena that pose no problem at all for (AP). Let's now turn to these accounts.

5   Other neutral accounts

There are a number of characterizations of singularity in the literature that resemble (AP) in

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18 Nelson and Fitch helpfully discuss the below motivations for the singular / general distinction alongside the reduplication argument.

not presupposing any claims about the metaphysics of propositions. They thus have a certain advantage over (AC). Some of them also have an appealing simplicity to them. However, I will argue that each of them faces problems that are easily avoided by (AP). Thus the positive proposal above turns out to be the most satisfactory option.

5.1   Truth-value dependence

Iris Einheuser introduces the notion of singularity with the example of a "singular proposition about Socrates, a proposition that "directly involves" Socrates in the sense that its truth value turns, necessarily, on how things stand with Socrates" (Einheuser 2012: 1). Similarly, Stalnaker (1988: 160) says that "For those who adopt the possible worlds conception of a proposition, a singular proposition will be a proposition whose truth in any given possible world depends on the properties of some particular individual." We can make the idea a bit more formal as follows:

> TRUTH-VALUE DEPENDENCE (TV): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff for some property F, necessarily p is true iff o has F.[19]

This seems to correctly classify the proposition that the F is G as a non-singular proposition. For that proposition is actually true iff a certain F (*o1*, say) is G, but if a different object *o2* had been uniquely F, the proposition would have been true iff *o2* had been G. So there is no object o such that necessarily, the proposition is true iff o is G.

But there is a significant problem with (TV). If o is the actual G, (TV) incorrectly predicts that the proposition that *the actual G is F* is singular wrt o since necessarily that proposition is about o and is true iff o is F.[20] ('The actual G' is a rigid designator of o.) The problem generalizes to all propositions we would express using *de facto* rigid designators. For instance, take the proposition p that the square of two is a boring number. The square of two is the same number, four, in every possible world, so necessarily, p is true iff four is a boring number. Hence, p is singular wrt four according to (TV). But we cannot count p as singular. It fails (NQ), for one thing, as it is about four only qua possessor of a certain property. Someone might entertain that proposition while thinking about four only "indirectly", as whatever object had the property. I am certain that none of Salmon, Soames, Kaplan, Recanati, Adams, and so on would accept (TV) in light of the problem just raised.[21]

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19 Once again, note the importance of 'about an object o'. Consider a version of (TV) without the aboutness requirement: A proposition p is singular wrt o iff for some property F, necessarily p is true iff o has F. This thesis would disastrously entail that *every* necessary proposition is singular with respect to *everything* that necessarily possesses a certain property! This is an even broader problem than the ones I raise below.

20 It may be a proposition that is singular wrt the actual world, but it is not singular with respect to the actual G.

21 See the end of the discussion of (FV) below for a comment on views that would identify p with the proposition that four is a boring number.

Someone might hope to avoid the problem just posed for (TV) by replacing the modal explanation of dependence with some other notion.[22] For some sort of dependence, the idea would be this: A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff the truth-value of p in any world depends on whether o possesses a certain property. Without surveying every available notion of dependence it is hard to say that the strategy is totally hopeless, but I do think it is unpromising. For on any notion of dependence I can imagine, the truth-value of the proposition that the square of two is a boring number *does* depend on the properties of four. So that proposition will be wrongly counted as singular by this revised approach to truth-value dependence.

In hindsight, it is not surprising that (TV) is unsuccessful. The basic idea motivating discussions of singularity has to do with some sort of non-qualitativeness, as (NQ) and (AP) reflect. But there is just no reason to think that we would have non-qualitative aboutness whenever we have a necessary covariation between a proposition's truth-value and the properties of an individual. Obviously some properties are always possessed by the same individual, so those properties can be exploited to combine qualitative aboutness with the right sort of covariation.

5.2   Object-dependence

A singular proposition, Salmon writes, "is what our British colleagues call an object-involving or object-dependent proposition" (2009: 33). The latter way of thinking of singularity stems largely from the work of Gareth Evans (1982) and John McDowell. The latter writes that while Russell viewed singular propositions as having objects as constituents, constituency is "not essential to the real insight [Russell's] notion of singular propositions embodies. The real insight is that there are propositions ... that are object-dependent" (1986: 233). Authors building on McDowell and Evans generally spell out object-dependence in something like the following way: "A singular proposition is ontologically dependent on the objects it involves: If the objects hadn't existed, the proposition wouldn't have existed either" (Einheuser 2011: 1). Similarly, Tim Crane describes token singular thoughts by saying that "the singularity of a singular thought is guaranteed by the thought having a content which either contains or is constitutively dependent on the particular object it is about. So if that object had not existed the content would not either, and neither would the thought episode" (2011: 24). A first attempt to state the main thesis is this:

> OBJECT DEPENDENCE 1 (OD1): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o
> iff necessarily, if o does not exist, p does not exist.[23]

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22 Thanks to Derek Ball for help here and in the parallel discussion below about object-dependence.
23 Again, note how crucial the presence is of the requirement that p be 'about o' – this prevents (OD1) from

It is plausible, though not obvious, that if a given individual had not existed, there would have been no such thing as the proposition that that individual was F. But (OD1) is obviously too weak. For one thing, as long as there is one necessary existent, that thing will be an o that satisfies the right-hand side of (OD1). Every proposition about it (in the intuitive sense of about) will count as singular, even propositions about it only qua possessor of some property! The problem manifests itself with propositions like those that refuted (TV). The proposition p that the square of two is a boring number is about the number four. Since four exists necessarily, it is not possible that it does not exist while p does exist. Hence it trivially satisfies the right-hand side of (OD1), so that (OD1) wrongly categorises p as singular wrt four.

The problem with necessary existents has not gone totally unnoticed by proponents of object-dependence, but it has not been taken seriously. McDowell, for instance, begins one paper by stating the view he opposes as one on which a Fregean "can represent an utterance, or a propositional attitude, as being about an object only by crediting it with a content that determines the object by specification, or at least in such a way that the content is available to be thought or expressed whether the object exists or not" (1984: 214). To hold that not all Fregean thoughts are like this, so that for some thoughts, it's *not* the case that they're available whether the object exists or not, is according to McDowell to maintain that there are Fregean *de re* (singular) thoughts. But in a footnote, he says that his formulation of *de re*-ness as object-dependence "cannot be right where the object's existence is necessary ... But having noted this, I shall ignore it; the issue I want to consider is whether Fregean theory can accommodate *de re* thoughts outside that area". This is a mistake if McDowell aims to give an accurate characterization of the real insight behind the idea of a singular proposition or a singular thought, as he professes to do in the quote given earlier. We should neither be prevented from explaining what makes some propositions about necessary existents singular, nor forced to give wholly different accounts of singularity depending on whether or not the object in question exists necessarily.

One attempt to repair (OD1) would be to replace the modal language with a different means for capturing the idea of dependence. While the proposition that the square of two is a boring number exists only in worlds in which four exists, it seems plausible that the existence of that proposition doesn't *depend* on the existence of four. Let's try to state the thesis as follows:

> OBJECT DEPENDENCE 2 (OD2): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff p's existence depends on o's existence.

To find a counterexample to (OD2), the strategy would be to find a proposition p and

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immediately deeming every proposition to be singular wrt itself.

object o such that p was about o only in the weak, pre-theoretic sense, while nevertheless p's existence depended on o's existence for other reasons. Without an exhaustive examination of different notions of dependence (there are many competing notions of grounding, for instance – see Correia and Schnieder (2012) for some examples) it is difficult to refute (OD2) by this method of counterexample. However, I think (OD2) is likely to face a problem arising from the fact that standard notions of dependence are transitive.[24] Let p be the proposition that the 41st US President respects George W. Bush. Now p is about George H.W. Bush, and plausibly depends for its existence on W., his son. But if W.'s existence depends on his father's existence, as it plausibly does, then by transitivity it will follow that p depends for its existence on H.W.'s existence. Hence (OD2) will yield the result that p is singular wrt H.W., which is incorrect. It is about H.W., but it is only singular wrt his son. If you think that W.'s existence doesn't depend on his father's existence, you will probably still think that his existence depends on the existence of some object o non-identical with W. In that case, we can construct a new counterexample by taking an appropriate property F that o uniquely possesses and considering the proposition that the F respects George W. Bush. Again, it will incorrectly follow from (OD2) that the proposition is singular wrt o.

Someone might try to avoid the sort of counterexample above by appealing to a non-transitive notion of dependence. One version of this strategy would be to appeal to some sort o f *direct dependence.* We could spell the notion out this way: B directly depends on A iff B depends on A and there's no C that depends on A and on which B depends. It is not clear, however, that a singular proposition's existence *directly* depends on the relevant object's existence. We want the idea of object-dependence to be compatible with various views of propositions, including views on which propositions have constituents, and on such a view, it seems likely that singular propositions will sometimes have constituents with constituents as constituents. For example, the proposition not-p might contain the proposition p as a constituent, and the latter might contain an object o as a constituent. Plausibly, in that case not-p's existence would not directly depend on o's existence, since it would depend on p's existence and p's existence would depend on o's existence. The problem here is that a version of (OD) stated in terms of direct dependence would then fail to count not-p as singular wrt o. Of course, the true metaphysics of propositions might avoid the problem with this particular example, but the broader point is that it is just not clear whether singular propositions will *directly* depend on the objects wrt which they're singular.

Rather than looking for other non-transitive refinements of (OD2) to refute, I will note two things. First, it seems likely that for any notion of dependence, there will be some property R

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24 This includes the notion of grounding. Raven (2013b) calls this the orthodox view on grounding, but notes that Schaffer (2012) attempts to develop a non-transitive notion of ground. Raven (2013a) offers objections to Schaffer's arguments against transitivity.

other than identity such that for any things x, y, and z, if x's existence depends on y's existence and y bears R to z, then x's existence depends on z's existence. If that is so, then it will be possible to construct a counterexample to a version of (OD) that incorporates the relevant notion of dependence. For some y and z such that yRz, simply find an appropriate property F uniquely possessed by z and consider the proposition that the F is self-identical and y is self-identical. That proposition will be about z and will be singular wrt y, but will not be singular wrt z. But (OD) will deem it singular wrt z. Second, a perfectly general consideration should lead us to expect that any version of (OD) will fail: (OD) bears no close relationship to the basic idea behind singularity captured in (NQ). Why think that if a proposition or thought is about an object merely qua possessor of some qualities, it's existence can't still depend on the object's existence? It could. To defend (OD) it is not enough to be granted one direction of the thesis, that a proposition or thought's existence will depend on an object *if* it's about the object in some non-qualitative way.

5.3   Function-value

The most prominent champion of coarse-grained propositions, Stalnaker, not only holds that an account of singularity is compatible with his view of propositions, but he offers an account of his own, one that differs from the gloss noted above. According to Stalnaker, what is "essential to the idea of a singular proposition is that the identity of a singular proposition is a function of an individual rather than of some concept or mode of presentation of the individual" (1988: 160). He makes a similar remark elsewhere, claiming that singular propositions "can be defined as propositions that are the values of the propositional functions that are defined in terms of attributes" (Stalnaker 2009: 238). The idea seems to be this: Take an attribute, e.g. the property of being old. We can use that attribute to form a function from individuals to propositions. The function maps o1 to one proposition, maps o2 to another proposition, and so on. Staying as close to Stalnaker's formulation above as we can, a first pass at formulating the thesis is this:

> FUNCTION VALUE (FV): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff for o
> as argument, a function defined in terms of attributes has p as its value.

But we can use the attribute of being old to define a function that maps every individual to the proposition that the tallest human is old. By definition, that proposition is a value of the propositional function for any individual o as argument, but that proposition is not singular. So (FV) needs to be changed to incorporate something restricting the relevant kind of propositional function. The restriction that Stalnaker seems to think appropriate is not hard to find: "Any attribute determines a unique propositional function that takes an individual into

the proposition that attributes the attribute to the individual, the proposition that is true if and only if the individual possesses the attribute" (Stalnaker 2009: 237). We end up with this:

> FUNCTION VALUE 2 (FV2): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff for some attribute F, the function that maps each object to the proposition that that object is F has, for argument o, p as its value.

But all that we have achieved here is saying that p is a singular proposition iff for some o, p is the proposition that o has a certain attribute. To my mind, this doesn't tell us what singularity is. It might be extensionally adequate, but it is uninformative. For a given o, it tells us that the proposition that o is F is singular. But what is it about the proposition that o is F that makes it singular? It still feels as if the original question is unanswered. Perhaps one could refuse to look for any further explanation, insisting that there is no deeper account of singularity. But it would be more satisfying if we could find a deeper account.

Perhaps it may help illustrate the point to ask: Why accept (FV2) rather than the opposing claim that a proposition p is singular if for some property F and property G, p is the proposition that the F is G? This opposing claim is wrong. The proposition that the F is G would not be singular. It would differ in kind from the proposition that o is F. But what would the relevant difference be? What is the relevant respect in which propositions of the latter sort are special. This question should be answerable, and I submit that the answer is provided by (AP). The singularity of the proposition that o is F consists in the fact that the proposition is about o without being about o merely by concerning o's properties. The proposition that the F is G is about the F merely by concerning the F's properties. Even if the reader is unsure about (AP) itself, I hope we can agree that (AP) attempts to offer a characterization of singularity in a way that goes deeper than (FV2). One demonstration of this is the way in which (AP) makes obvious its connections to the motivating ideas behind discussions of singularity (e.g., the reduplication argument). (FV2) does not do that, and offers no progress toward helping us grapple with singularity-related issues such as those mentioned in the introduction to this paper (for instance, whether singular propositions can exist in the absence of the objects with respect to which they are singular). Even if extensionally correct, (FV2) doesn't satisfy us if we want to understand what singularity is.

Could Stalnaker offer a different elaboration of (FV)? If we had a better explanation of what kind of propositional function must be used in the thesis, we might get a more satisfying characterization of singularity. But it is not clear that we can say anything better without presupposing the notion of singularity or building in the materials of competing accounts. The restriction must limit the relevant function's values to singular propositions, but so far we are left without an independent way to identify the latter category.   Stalnaker seems to intend

'propositional function' to mean whatever has historically been meant by the term. But as Kaplan says, a propositional function, for Russell, was "nothing more than a function from individuals to singular propositions containing them. [...] An open formula expresses a singular proposition for every assignment of values to its free variables. If we hypostatize the way in which a given open formula associates singular propositions with values of its variable, we obtain a propositional function" (Kaplan 1986: 241).

It is worth briefly noting a more general worry about any attempt Stalnaker might make to define singularity. On his view of propositions, necessarily equivalent propositions are identical. Assuming that the proposition that 1289 is prime is singular, it follows that the proposition that every triangle has three sides is singular. Similarly, if o is the actual G, the proposition that the actual G is F is singular so long as the proposition that o is F is singular, for the two propositions are necessarily equivalent. If necessarily equivalent propositions are identical, there is no way to capture the intended singular / general distinction. Drawing the distinction requires a certain fineness of grain.[25]

5.4   Language, thought, and the paradigm of the variable

Discussions of singularity often make use of English supplemented with explicit variables. According to Soames (2010a: 19), e.g., singular propositions are propositions of the sort expressed by 'x is visible only in the morning' relative to an assignment of Venus to 'x'. Variables are taken to be the paradigms of direct reference, and hence to be the paradigmatic tools for expressing singular propositions.

> VARIABLE PARADIGM 1 (VP1): A proposition p about an object o is singular wrt o iff p is expressed by some open sentence $\phi(x)$ relative to some assignment of o to 'x'.

Other authors offer material-mode variants of the idea, using rather than mentioning a variable. For instance, Kit Fine writes that "A singular proposition ... is merely one to the effect that an object x has a certain property" (2005: 22).

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25 I suspect that Stalnaker really had in mind some notion like *singularly expressing* a proposition, a notion that would capture the way that a referential expression contributes to the determination of a proposition. (The reader might note that the quotes above strongly resemble Stalnaker's explanation of direct reference in *Mere Possibilities* (94).) His framework might more easily accommodate such a sentence- or term-relative notion of singularity than it could accommodate a monadic property of propositions. This would certainly not be the notion of singularity intended in most of the literature, however, as the latter is not supposed to be relative to a linguistic item. Could a relative notion of singularity do all the work that singularity has been intended to do? (Thanks to X for pressing me on this question.) I think not, but cannot defend that answer fully here, as it would require a lengthy survey of various roles for singular propositions such as those mentioned in the introduction above, and the issues seem to me quite puzzling. To briefly take just one concern mentioned above that is relevant to Stalnaker (2012), consider the claim that a proposition that is singular wrt o could not have existed if o did not exist. If the same proposition could be singular wrt o relative to one term and general wrt o relative to another term, what are we to make of the concern? The question now seems more perplexing.

> VARIABLE PARADIGM 2 (VP2): A proposition p about an object x is singular wrt x iff
> p is the proposition that x has a certain property.

Perhaps Fine and Soames only mean to provide heuristics to identify singular propositions, but one could take their statements in a more serious way, as attempts to say what it is for a proposition to be singular. Although I don't want to overstate the force of the concern, it would certainly be strange if we needed to define singularity by means of an artificial technical device. If any devices of natural language, e.g. anaphoric pronouns, are variables, then (VP1) and (VP2) give us no more than we could get by sticking with something like this:

> VARIABLE PARADIGM 3 (VP3): A proposition p about an object is singular wrt that
> object iff p is the proposition that it has a certain property.

One reason Fine and Soames may have chosen (VP1) and (VP2) instead of (VP3) could simply be that the latter requires an additional empirical assumption if it is to reflect the view that variables are the paradigm tools for expressing singular propositions: that pronouns in English have the semantics of variables. (The thesis employs 'it' rather than an explicit variable.) As Hawthorne and Manley (14) point out, this empirical assumption may be false, a worry that does not affect (VP1) or (VP2), so fans of the variable paradigm may be safer sticking with one of the latter two.

Regardless of whether pronouns are variables, a simple objection to all three theses is that they don't tell us what singularity is. They might be extensionally adequate, but they are uninformative in just the way that (FV2) is. In fact, (VP2) is essentially just (FV2) with the superfluous mention of functions stripped away. For a given x, the three versions of (VP) tell us that the proposition that x is F is singular. But what is it about the proposition that x is F that makes it count as singular? We are offered no answer to this question. How might it be answered? Well, if either (VP1) or (VP2) is at least extensionally adequate, then it must be that variables differ in some important way from descriptions, for variables are being used crucially to state which propositions are singular. If we can better explain this non-descriptiveness, *that* would seem like progress. The answer is provided by (AP). The propositions expressed by open sentences relative to assignments of objects to the variables are propositions that are about objects without being about them by concerning their properties.

An idea related to (VP) would be to appeal to the notion of a (directly) referential term in general, rather than to variables in particular. For instance, Hawthorne and Manley write that "the category of referential terms affords us with a preliminary grip on a certain kind of content: *singular* contents are those that are expressed by sentences containing referential terms" (4). Later, they state that a singular content "can be understood as a content of the sort expressed by sentences containing referential terms, or by open sentences relative to

assignments" (16). This reference-first approach to singularity might be compared with a thought-first approach. One could say that a singular proposition is a proposition of the sort that is the content of a singular thought vehicle, where the latter is a vehicle containing a referential concept (assuming it is appropriate to apply the notion of reference to concepts). We might even synthesize these two accounts of singularity,[26] holding that a singular proposition is one that is the content of a vehicle containing a referential constituent.

> VEHICLES-FIRST (VF): A proposition p about an object x is singular wrt x iff p is the content of a vehicle containing a referential constituent.

This approach faces the same problems that made (VP) and (FV2) unsatisfactory. We want to know what it is for a proposition to be singular, and they tell us that all vehicles of a certain sort express singular propositions. We're still left wondering what it is about the propositions expressed that makes for singularity. Referential terms or concepts differ from non-referential terms or concepts in their semantics, and those different semantics result in different contents expressed by the vehicles containing them. How do those contents differ? To state that they differ in which vehicles express them would be to get things backward – the semantic difference between referential and non-referential terms is a difference in what sorts of contents are expressed through their use.

Two other worries resembling those for (FV2):[27] First, the vehicle-first approach threatens to rule out automatically that there might be singular propositions that aren't the contents of any thoughts or sentences. There might not be, but our characterization of singularity shouldn't decide the issue. (For comparison, imagine that an explanation of what it is for a proposition to be quantificational built in the claim that only contents of thoughts or sentences could be quantificational propositions. That consequence would suggest that we had overstepped the bounds of our task. Why would expressibility have anything to do with a proposition being quantificational?) To avoid this problem, one would have to add a bit to (VF), stating that singular propositions are ones *of the sort* that are the contents of such-and-such vehicles, even if not all propositions of the relevant sort are the contents of any vehicles (cf. H&M: 14). But then the unilluminating nature of the proposal becomes obvious. What do propositions "of that sort" have in common?

Second, the superficiality of (VF) is demonstrated by the fact that it is not obvious how it connects with any of the motivating ideas in discussions of singularity, e.g. being about an

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26 Thanks here to Paul Hovda.

27 As discussed in an earlier footnote, someone like Stalnaker may want to tie the notion of singularity to vehicles because he rejects singularity as a monadic property of propositions. Instead, he may want a revisionary notion that captures a relation we might call "singularly expressing". This would be a different proposal than (VF), since the latter holds back from making singularity a relation between a proposition, a particular, and a vehicle. There is unfortunately not enough space here to thoroughly explore potential merits of the relational option.

object *qua* possessor of a property, non-qualitativeness, or the reduplication argument. It sheds no light on questions such as whether singular propositions can exist in the absence of the objects with respect to which they are singular. If (VF) were accompanied by an enlightening account of referentiality, of course, these problems might be mitigated. But explaining what referentiality is a non-trivial task. And if, as I've claimed above, referentiality is a matter of what sorts of contents are expressed using the term in question, (VF) presupposes that the most important work is already done. What is the relevant difference between the two sorts of contents?

Hawthorne and Manley are more pessimistic about the notion of referentiality (and the related notion of a singular thought). If their worries are justified, there would be a serious threat to vehicle-first approaches to singularity.

> As with 'reference', we must decide among competing ideas about what features of a cognitive state are criterial for it to count as a 'singular thought'. The simplest idea we encountered in the Introduction is this: to be a singular thought is to be a cognitive attitude toward a singular content: viz., a content of the sort expressed by sentences containing referential expressions. But in light of the foregoing discussion, it is far from clear whether we have an independent grip on the notion of a referential expression. (248)

Unmoored from reference and singular thought, singular propositions would then need to be characterized in other terms. We might even begin to doubt that there is any clear notion of a singular proposition, or that singular propositions have an important role to play in philosophy.

Luckily, (AP) shows that we can develop an account of singularity that is independent of the notions of a referential term and a singular thought. In fact, with (AP) in hand, we can make a first pass at explanations of the latter two notions. A referential term is one such that sentences containing it thereby express singular propositions. A singular thought is one whose content is a singular proposition. These accounts might need further defence or adjustment, but they should not seem surprising. Abstracting away from their views on the metaphysics of propositions, Russell and neo-Russellians like Kaplan have this basic picture of reference. The characterization of singular thought is also familiar – Robin Jeshion, for instance, says that we can usefully characterise a singular thought as a thought whose content is a singular proposition (Jeshion 2010b: 108).

Having noted this nice benefit of (AP), we can end by recalling some of (AP)'s other advantages, some of which have been revealed by looking at competing accounts of singularity. (TV) was unable to correctly classify propositions that concerned properties uniquely satisfied by the same object in every world. Such propositions are no problem for (AP). Versions of

(OD) struggled to deal with propositions about necessary existents or about objects with necessary connections to other objects. These problems are easily avoided by (AP). Other proposals, like (FV) and (FV2), either presupposed the notion of singularity or failed to illuminate the phenomenon as well as (AP). As noted earlier, our proposal (AP) also meshes nicely with the arguments that have been given in the literature for singular propositions, and with related glosses on what a singular proposition might be. It provides a clarification of the intuitive thesis (NQ) and the related notion of directness at issue in (DA). Moreover, it does all this in terms that could be accepted by proponents of widely varying accounts of the metaphysics of propositions.

Although a full exploration of the significance of these results would require a separate essay, it is worth recalling the connections that we noted at the outset between singularity and a variety of other issues, e.g.: actualism and hacceitism, presentism, quantifying in, acquaintance, and perception and hallucination. Different accounts of singular propositions may cast these issues in different lights. Suppose we want to defend presentism, for instance. If we adopted (AC), the view that singularity is a matter of constituency, then in order to hold that there are singular propositions about future or past objects, we would have to worry about being committed to the existence of things with non-existent constituents – an unappealing commitment for many philosophers. Suppose, on the other hand, that we rejected the Russellian view of propositions while adopting the account of singularity defended above, (AP), according to which singularity is a matter of being about an object without being about it merely by concerning its properties. Then in order to hold that there are singular propositions about future or past objects, we would have to hold that there are things *about* non-existent objects. This will still seem unappealing to some theorists, but to many it will seem more plausible to hold this view than the view that existing things can have non-existing things as constituents. At any rate, the two commitments flowing from the two accounts of singularity are distinct, which is enough to give a preliminary example of how the results of the above discussion could impact debates elsewhere in philosophy. A more careful examination of this example, or of examples drawn from the other areas mentioned above, is left for future work.[28]

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