**Public and Private Concepts**

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1. *Consider this case.* Jane has normal beliefs about tigers, including that they can interbreed with lions. John has all the same beliefs, save that he thinks tigers *can’t* interbreed with lions.

It looks as if Jane and John have just the same concept of tiger. Their concepts both refer to tigers, and moreover they think of tigers in almost identical ways, save only for one teeny difference of opinion.

But now consider Simon, who acquires all Jane’s beliefs about animals he calls ‘tigers’ and all John’s beliefs about animals he calls ‘panthera tigris’. Since he thinks that tigers can interbreed with lions and panthera tigris cannot, by the standard Fregean test he must express different concepts by ‘tiger’ and ‘panthera tigris’ respectively.

But his ‘tiger’ concept is as close to Jane’s as can be, while his ‘panthera tigris’ concept is as close to John’s ‘tiger’ concept as can be.

So, contra my initial suggestion, Jane and John must express different concepts by ‘tiger’.

This form of argument, due to Gabriel Segal, following Ned Block and Brian Loar, can clearly be generalized, to show that *any* difference in the set of beliefs that two individuals form with their respective concepts implies that these are different concepts.

Note that it can’t be blocked by distinguishing ‘meaning-constituting’ beliefs from others. After all, the argument didn’t work by assuming any beliefs were meaning-constituting. It just took an intra-individual Frege differentiation and exported it.

2. *Radical idiosyncratism*. All concepts come out as idiosyncratic to the individuals who possess them. Very ugly.

There is no possibility of individuals *communicating*, in the sense of passing a given thought between them.

There is no possibility of our *generalizing* psychologically about how individuals who share a given thought will think and act.

3. *What to do?*

We need to move beyond the Fregean idea that an individual’s thoughts are entities constructed out of *concepts*, potentially public items that different individuals can deploy. Once we apply the Fregean test to such items, radical idiosyncratism is inevitable.

Instead we need to bring in vehicles, something like *words* in the language of thought, or *mental files*, where these are particular persisting objects inside the heads of individuals, perhaps with items of information attached and activated when the files are deployed.

Then we can apply the Frege test at *this* level to decide when an individual must have distinct files, and use this to explain how we can have Frege cases where someone believes Fa but not Fb even though a = b.

Now, we can also classify or *type* these particulars across individuals (and indeed within them), in various ways, thus giving us various possible notions of *same/different concept/thought*.

But we mustn’t allow ourselves to infer *different* *type* of *concept* or *thought*, in whatever sense, as soon as an individual has two files distinguished by the Frege test, otherwise we’ll be forced back to idiosyncratism. (This is of course consistent with holding that an individual might not realize his Cicero and Tully thoughts are in the relevant sense the same thought, due to their being housed in distinct files.)

Now we can say that Simon, with his *tiger* and *panthera* *tigris* files, has two distinct *vehicles*, but they are not different in (any) *type*.

When he thinks *tigers live in India* and *panthera tigris lives in India* are these different thoughts or the same thought? Well they are quantitatively distinct, but qualitatively identical. Two such thoughts will be different in the sense that this particular car is different from that particular car, but the same in the sense that those two cars can be the same car—for example, the Vauxhall Safira.

4. *How should we type thoughts?*

I am attracted by the idea that we don’t need to type more finely than reference, and will see how far this can be defended.

But the move just advocated doesn’t require this. We might for example specify that two files aren’t instances of the same concept and so can’t contribute to the same thoughts unless they have the same origin in addition to same reference (Sainsbury and Tye).

Or we could specify that they aren’t instances of the same concept and so can’t contribute to the same thoughts unless they bear the same epistemically rewarding relationship to the same reference (Recanati).

One trouble with these options is that they seem to multiply the number of mental files in individuals beyond necessity.

While typing files as the same in all qualitative respects doesn’t require us to identify then as particulars (because we reject the identity of indiscernibles for files), typing them as different in even one qualitative respect does require as to distinguish them as particulars (because we have no option about the indiscernibility of identicals, and so about the distinctness of discernibles).

5. *Sainsbury and Tye*. They seem to give us far more mental files that we want.

Learning names. Consider someone I know well by sight, and am later told her name is ‘Suzy’. For Sainsbury and Tye my *her* thoughts and my *Suzy* thoughts will involve different concepts, because of the different origins, and so I must have two files, which looks like double counting.

Multiple names. I have both the concepts HUND and DOG; I know many nicknames for someone. Sainsbury and Tye require different files. Over-counting again.

6. *Recanati* also arguably has too many files.

Demonstrative files, memory files, recognitional files. Information needs to be constantly transferred between such files. But why not just have one *namelike* file which is deployed on all the relevant occasions? (The fact we use demonstrative words to express our thoughts doesn’t mean the thoughts themselves are demonstrative.)

The proliferation of files also threatens to give us less de jure co-reference than we would like. This leads to yet more (recognitional-demonstrative) files. But again there would be no need for this proliferation if we started with namelike files.

7. I am interested in the possibility that *reference is all we need*.

But don’t we need more fine-grained concepts to understand *psychological generalizing*, *belief attribution*, and *communication*? Let me take these in turn.

8. *Psychological Generalizing.*

It is tempting to argue that people who think about a common referent ‘in different ways’ will think and act differently with respect to it—and that therefore we must type their files as conceptually different, in order to put them into the right categories for generalizing about their thoughts and behavior.

However, note that different ‘ways of thinking’ will normally involve people having different sets of *beliefs* involving their respective files, and that we can standardly use these belief differences to explain their differing thoughts and behavior, *even if* we classify their files as instances of the same concepts.

In any case, it’s not clear how far psychological generalizing appeals to (interpersonal) semantics at all, as opposed to (intrapersonal) syntax. Many ‘logical’ psychological theories simply generalize over syntactic mental files, or words in the language of thought, without worrying about semantics. (For example, (x)(a)(b)(F)(If x believes Fa and believes a = b, x will believe Fb; again (x)(r)(a)(If x wants r, and believes action a is casually necessary for r, x will do a).)

Still, there are some ‘content-sensitive’ psychological generalizations too. Roughly, these are those generalizations that track the distal results of people’s behavior, under the general principle that people who desire *such-and-such* (and are guided by *true* beliefs) will get *such-and-such*. But such generalizing would seem to do just fine with typing files by reference. People who want *water* will tend to get *water* (if they act on true beliefs), however they think about water. (And if they do draw different inferences and adopt different means because they think about water ‘in different ways’, we can explain this by their differing beliefs about water, as above.)

9. *Belief attribution*.

Well, this is hard for everybody.

I take it that belief attributions convey inter alia the referential Russellian contents of thoughts (in line with quantifying in and limited co-referential substitution).

But I assume that they also convey something about the structure of the individual believer’s files. (‘He believes that Ortcutt is a spy, but not that the man in the brown hat is a spy’.)

The question is whether such indications of an individual’s structures of files are informed by some systematic fine-grained inter-individual typing of files (as opposed to being done pragmatically and contextually, on a case-to-case basis).

I’m inclined to say the latter, but let us come back to this issue after having a look at the issue of communication.

[But first, quickly, what about empty thoughts: X thought that *Batman lost the Kryptonite* (imagine someone who didn’t know comics were fiction)?

How does that fit with the idea that attributions convey Russellian content? Isn’t this going to make all such attributions come out false?

Three options:

(a) Bring in intentional objects a la Tim Crane and Graham Priest. (But I’m suspicious of objects whose *only* role it to make certain plausible assertions come out true.)

(b) Go strongly Fregean, and deny that attributions imply Russellian contents. (But how then do we account for quantifying in, substitutions, etc?)

(c) Say that attributions of empty thoughts are strictly speaking false, and explain how they convey information (about the individual’s structure of files) even so. This is the line I’m inclined to favour,]

10. *Communication*.

Why not just say that A communicates their thought to B just in case B comes to house a thought with the same Russellian content as the one A intended to convey? That’s the primary purpose of language after all—to pass around accurate information about real-world objects, not to be some medium of psychological confession.

What about understanding that two terms in the speaker’s utterance are co-referential de jure? I am happy to allow that this is often part of what gets communicated. But note that all the hearer has to appreciate in such cases is that the same file is expressed by both terms. Francois in Istanbul gave us a very elegant and convincing analysis of what exactly needs to be understood in such cases. But that nowhere required, as far as I could see, that the hearer’s files are anything more than co-referential with the speaker’s.

That is, the hearer who hears ‘John is fat, John is tall . . .’ needs to appreciate that those two tokens of ‘John’ are two expressions of the *same* speaker-file. And so the hearer should understand that utterance by forming two thoughts using the *same* hearer-file. Everybody will then be geared up to trade on de jure co-reference, so to speak. But nothing yet seems to require any finer-grained commonality than coarse co-reference between speaker’s and hearer’s files.

11. But now I realize there are *harder cases*.

One is Loar’s case where X says to Y, on the train, ‘That guy’s a stockbroker’ intending the guy they watched on TV last night and have been talking about on the train, but Y understands him as referring to the guy they are now both looking at across the aisle—who is in fact the same person. Now here the speaker’s thought and the hearer’s thought involve files that are co-referential OK, but it looks like a clear case of miscommunication.

Or, in a community that doesn’t know Sam Clemens = Mark Twain, you say ‘SC is rich’ and I mishear you as saying that ‘MT is rich’ and form the thought that *MT is rich*. Here again the speaker’s and hearer’s files are co-referential, but it doesn’t look like they have communicated successfully.

12. Perhaps the way forward is to introduce the notion of a *communal knowledge-gathering practice*. Two or more people are focused on some object, either via something like mutual attention, or by sharing one or more words that they mutually know to refer to that object. They each have a corresponding file for that object. When any of them acquires information about the object, they express it verbally, and the hearers stick the information in the appropriate file. That is *communication*.

What about typing files across individuals as being instances of the same concept just in case they relate to the same *knowledge-gathering practice*? (Indeed why not go further and say that the files involved and the word(s) that express them are all deployments of the same shared persisting particular communal word? After all, part of what constitutes different intra-individual deployments of a file as deployments of the *same* file is that the individual treats these deployments as de jure co-referential. So why not apply the same principle across individuals when they all treat a bunch of tokens as de jure co-referential?)

However, I don’t think that either of these suggestions will work, because the structure of knowledge-gathering practices isn’t as neat as the structure of individual files. Within an individual, I take it, specific deployments of files fall into a nice arrangement of equivalence classes, under the relation *treated as de jure co-referential* (since this relation is reflexive, symmetrical AND transitive). This is part of what underpins our viewing the files as persisting particular objects.

But this won’t work across individuals, even across individuals who are naturally though of as speaking the same language. It might be common knowledge between A and B that *Mark Twain = Samuel Clemens*, in which case they can use the two terms as stylistic variants in their conversation, but not so between A or B, on the one hand, and C, on the other. (The latter mightn’t know that MT = SC and A and B mightn’t want to tell her.) So while A, B and C share various pairwise knowledge-gathering practices, these practices don‘t pool together. (‘MTa’ and ‘SCb‘ could be de re coreferential in a conversation between A and B, and ‘SCb’ and ‘SCc’ so in a conversation between B and C, yet ‘MTa’ and ‘SCc’ not de jure co-referential in a conversation between A and C.)

(For a similar cases involving shared attention, perhaps we can consider cases where some of us know (we know) the name of the person we are looking at, but others sharing the attention don’t know the name , , ,)

So any typing of files as de jure co-referential across individuals will be relative to knowledge-gathering practices. We’ll get something like: the files are the same for *these* people, in respect of *this* shared practice. This will fall far short of a typing that can be applied uniformly across people in general, or even across people who share the same language.

13. Finally, some *tidying-up thoughts on belief-attributions*.

*If*, contra the last section, knowledge-gathering practices *did* give us a uniform finer-than-reference way of typing files across people, then this could inform belief attributions, and we could use the public words involved in those practices as a way of signalling which type of files were involved in thoughts being attributed, in very much the way Frege envisaged.

But I say that won’t work, for the reasons given. Instead, when belief attributions commit us to claims abut the nature and structure of the attributee’s files, they do so pragmatically and contextually, on a case-to-case basis. No doubt our appreciation that the attributee is involved in certain knowledge-gathering practices will be relevant both to what we want to say about his files, and how we say it. But it is not obvious to me that there are any general theoretical principles about how this works. (After all, the speaker, the hearer, and the attribute will generally be involved in different sets of practices, not to mention that they can also all vary in their knowledge of these practices.)

Having said that, perhaps there is one last positive thing to say here. An awful lot (nearly all?) human files are opened as the result of acquaintance with public words. This means that most Frege cases arise as a result of individuals not realizing that two pubic words co-refer. And so in such cases we can always (though it needn’t be the only way) keep track of which file they are using by attributing beliefs using the word associated with their file. (‘He believes that Bernie Schwartz was born in Brooklyn, but not Tony Curtis.’) Incidentally, note how easily this point explains the hyperintensional cases that are problematic for Fregeans. (‘He believes that gorse grows in Yorkshire, but not furze.’)