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De re and de se

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1. *De re* thought and token-reflexivity

There is an intuitive contrast between descriptive thoughts about an object (e.g. the thought that the strongest man in the world can lift 150 kilos) and ‘nondescriptive’ or ‘*de re*’ thoughts about an object (e.g. the thought that *that man* is drunk). But it is not easy to make the contrast explicit without going stipulative.

The distinction between *de re* thoughts and descriptive thoughts cannot be spelled out, as it sometimes is, by saying that in the *de re* case the object the thought is about is referred to ‘directly’, without any intervening ‘mode of presentation’. For one cannot think of an object without thinking of it under some mode of presentation or other. Thus in the example I have given (‘that man is drunk’) there is a mode of presentation through which the reference is apprehended : a demonstrative mode of presentation. Such a mode of presentation imposes that there be a certain information link between the thinking subject and what his thought is about. A subject cannot think ‘that man is drunk’ unless he is e.g. perceiving the man in question.

The mode of presentation arguably plays a truth-conditional role in descriptive thoughts, while it is ‘truth-conditionally irrelevant’ in *de re* thoughts (Recanati 1993). If I think of a certain object, *a*, that it is *F*, the thought is true iff *a* is *F*, regardless of how the object *a* is thought about. So if I see a certain man — call him Oscar — and think ‘he is drunk’, my thought is true if and only if Oscar is drunk (at the time of thinking). The truth-condition of the thought is singular : there is an object *x* (namely Oscar) such that the thought is true iff *x* satisfies the predicate ‘drunk’. In contrast, a descriptive thought about *a* has general rather than singular truth-conditions. Suppose Oscar is the strongest man in the world. Instead of being true iff Oscar can lift 150 kilos, the (descriptive) thought that the strongest

man in the world can lift 150 kilos is true iff there is a man x such that for every man y distinct from x , x is stronger than y and x can lift 150 kilos. The man Oscar is not directly involved : the thought would be true even if some other man b turned out to be the strongest in the world and could lift 150 kilos. What is truth-conditionally relevant here is not the man, but the property of being the strongest man in the world. The thought is about the property (and only indirectly about its instantiator): it says that whoever has the property also has the ability to lift 150 kilos. But the demonstrative thought ‘he is drunk’ is about the man himself.

On this approach what distinguishes the *de re* case from the descriptive case is not the lack of a mode of presentation but its role. In both cases we can draw a distinction between the referent and the property through which it is apprehended (the property of being the strongest man in the world, or the property of being the man currently perceived by the thinking subject) ; but what goes into the truth-conditional content of the thought — what is relevant to determining whether the thought is true or false, given a circumstance of evaluation — is the referent in one case and the property in the other case. The descriptive thought that the strongest man in the world can lift 150 kilos is true iff *the property* of being the strongest man in the world has some higher-level property (viz. the property that whoever possesses it can lift 150 kilos), while the *de re* thought that that man is drunk is true iff *the man*, Oscar, has a first-level property (viz. the property of being drunk). In other words, the property through which Oscar is apprehended, viz. the property of being the man currently being seen by the thinking subject, serves a purely instrumental role and drops out of the picture when we evaluate the thought as true or false : for evaluation purposes, what counts is the man Oscar, and the property of being drunk. Is Oscar drunk ? If he is, the *de re* thought that he is is true ; if not, not.

But how do we know that the property of being seen by the subject does not play a truth-conditional role and serves merely to fix the reference ? Why not say that here also, the property is what the thought is about ? Why not say that the thought is true if and only if the property of being currently seen by the subject possesses the higher-level property that its instantiator is a drunk man (or something like that) ? After all, if some other man, b , turned out to be the man seen by the thinker, the thought would be true iff that other man was drunk. Oscar is truth-conditionally relevant only because he *is* the man seen by the thinker. But in the same way, Oscar may be said to be truth-conditionally relevant in the descriptive case since he *is* the strongest man in the world.

Maybe the relevant distinction between *de re* thought and descriptive thought is fundamentally a distinction between the sorts of mode of presentation at stake rather than between the roles which the modes of presentation play. Or, if there is indeed a sustainable distinction between the roles which the modes of presentation play in the two cases, maybe that distinction can be established only by deriving it, as it were, from the sorts of modes of presentation at stake. So let us try and characterize the modes of presentation respectively at play in the *de re* case and the descriptive case.

In contrast to descriptive modes of presentation, *de re* modes of presentation involve *contextual relations* to the object. The object the thought is about is the object which stands in the right contextual relations to the thinking subject or (equivalently) to the mental episode in which the mode of presentation occurs. For example, a demonstrative mode of presentation ‘that *G*’ is based upon a certain contextual relation to the object, in virtue of which the subject is able to focus his or her attention on it and gather (typically perceptual) information from it. In general, *de re* thoughts are based upon relations in virtue of which the subject can gain information from the object. We may call such relations ‘acquaintance relations’. In perception the subject is so related to the object that he or she can gain information from it directly through his or her senses. The notion of ‘acquaintance’ must not be taken too strictly, however: when one hears of an object *a*, one is related to the object through a communication chain, and that is sufficient for entertaining *de re* thoughts about it. Thus I can think ‘that man is drunk’ even if the man in question is not someone I am perceiving but someone I am hearing about.

On the familiar, ‘anti-descriptivist’ picture put forward in the seventies, there are two types of representation. Descriptive representations represent their referent as possessing certain properties, and refer to whatever possesses the properties in question. The properties are represented, and the referent is represented via these properties, as the object which possesses them. In contrast, a nondescriptive representation represents its referent, *without* representing its properties, or at least, without representing the referent via those properties. How, if the properties of the object are not represented (or if their representation plays no mediating role), is the reference determined? Why is this object, rather than that one, represented? Answer: what determines the reference — what one’s thought is about — is something external to the content of the thought, something that is not represented, namely a certain relation *R* between the thought-token and some object in the world. The referent is not the object which conforms to a representation in the subject’s mind, as in the descriptive case

(where the referent is what satisfies the description), but the object which stands in a certain relation to a representation in the subject's mind.

When I say that the relation R is not represented, or that it is external to the content of the representation, what I mean is that no constituent of the thought, simple or complex, stands for that relation. When I think 'he is drunk', drunkenness is represented : one constituent of the thought is the concept 'drunk', which represents the property of being drunk. Likewise, when I think 'the strongest man in the world is F ', a (complex) constituent of the thought represents the property of being the strongest man in the world. But when I think 'he is drunk', no constituent of the thought stands for the property of being currently perceived by me. That relational property comes into the picture, for it determines what the demonstrative concept occurring in the thought represents : it represents the individual whom I am currently perceiving. But the property itself is not represented. Similarly, when I have thoughts about Cicero, my thoughts are about him in virtue of a certain causal chain of communication, but the causal chain is not represented in the thought. The thought only contains a constituent (my concept of Cicero) which stands for Cicero and does so in virtue of a certain relation between it and Cicero. But my concept of Cicero does not stand for that relation.

The situation is quite similar to that of token-reflexive words. Take the word 'I'. When it is used, it stands for the speaker, and it does so in virtue of a certain relation between the word (token) and the speaker : a token of the word 'I' refers to the individual who stands in the right relation to the token. But the word 'I' does not stand for that relation. To be sure, the word 'I' is conventionally governed by the rule that a token of 'I' refers to the person who utters that token. That rule constitutes (part of) the conventional meaning of the word 'I'. But the conventional meaning of the word-type must be distinguished from the content carried by a particular token of the word. The content of 'I' is simply the individual it stands for, determined by the contextual relation which the rule of use specifies. (In this respect, 'I' stands in sharp contrast to descriptions like 'the utterer of this token')

Nondescriptive representations behave like indexical words : like them, they are token-reflexive. Of course, linguistic conventions have no role to play here. What determines that the reference of a certain representation (token) is the entity which stands in the appropriate contextual relation to the thinker in whose thought the representation occurs is not a convention, but the *function* of the representation (type) a token of which occurs in the thought. It is the function of demonstrative representations to track the objects to which the subject stands in suitable demonstrative relations at the time of tokening. The function, in the

psychological case, plays the same sort of role as the conventional meaning in the linguistic case.

So, both in the linguistic and in the mental case, we must draw a distinction between two semantic levels. In the linguistic case the conventional meaning of the expression (type) is the token-reflexive rule that fixes its reference, while its content is what the expression (token) represents, viz. the reference itself. In the mental case, the function, or cognitive role, of the representation (type) corresponds to the token-reflexive rule that fixes its reference, while its content is what the representation (token) represents. The relation between the token and the referent comes into the picture when we spell out the conventional meaning of an indexical like 'I' or the cognitive role of a nondescriptive representation in the mental realm ; but that relation is not among the things that indexical words or nondescriptive representations represent ; they are not an aspect of their content. In contrast, descriptive representations do represent the properties (e.g. being the strongest man in the world) which the referent is presented as possessing. Those properties are involved at the content level, not merely at the level of 'character'.

To sum up, what justifies saying that the content of descriptive representations involves the properties through which the referent is apprehended while the content of nondescriptive representations does not is the token-reflexive nature of the determination of reference in the nondescriptive case. Token-reflexivity imposes a distinction between two semantic levels, roughly corresponding to Kaplan's character/content distinction. The relation through which the referent is apprehended belongs to the first semantic level, that of 'character', and is segregated from the content of the representation, which it determines.

2. Mental files and the 'self' concept

When I have a thought about Cicero, or about that man (who keeps dancing in front of me), certain properties of the referent are or may be represented. I think of Cicero as a famous Roman orator. I believe that the man in front of me is a tourist and I see that he wears a blue shirt. Those properties — 'Roman orator', 'tourist', 'wears a blue shirt' — are represented and ascribed by me to the person my thought is about. But, as I have just pointed out, the referent is not represented via such properties. Even if I think of Cicero as a famous Roman orator, what makes him the referent of my thought is not the fact that he satisfies the concept 'famous Roman orator'. The properties are represented in addition to the referent who is represented 'directly', i.e. not via the properties he is taken to possess. The reference relation

is based upon certain relations which are not, or rather need not (though they may), be represented.

This gives us the following ingredients. There is the (nondescriptive) representation in the mind of the thinker, and there is what it refers to, e.g. Cicero or the man in front of me. What determines what the representation refers to is a certain relation between the representation, *qua* mental particular, and the referent. It is the function of that type of representation to track the object which stands in such relations to its tokens. Additionally, as we have just seen, putative properties of the referent may be represented (and that may even include the relational property through which the reference is determined), but they play no role in determining what the nondescriptive representation is about : they are associated with the nondescriptive representation but do not fix its reference – as shown by the fact that they can be false of the referent.

To make sense of all this a number of authors have proposed to use the metaphor of the ‘mental file’. A mental file is a concrete particular, and it may bear relations to objects ; for example, a file may be opened or created as a result of encountering a particular object. Besides being an object bearing relations to other objects, a mental file has the property that it *contains information*. The information it contains corresponds to all the properties which the subject takes the referent to have, and whose representation occurs in the subject’s file about the object. The file is the place where the subject stores information about the referent, whether that information is genuine information or misinformation. Thus my file about the man dancing in front of me contains the information that he wears a blue shirt and that he is drunk. The properties ‘wears a blue shirt’, ‘drunk’ are both represented and belong to the content of the file. But, as we have seen, what determines the reference is not the content of the file (the referent is not the object which conforms to the contents of the file, since the subject may be quite mistaken) but the relation between the file, *qua* mental particular, and the object it has been created to track.

The overall picture behind the file metaphor is the following. In his cognitive life the subject encounters various objects to which he stands in various contextual relations. Some of these relations — the acquaintance relations — are epistemically rewarding in that they enable the subject to gain information from the object. For example, by holding an object in my hand, I can get information about its weight. By looking at it I can get information about its visual appearance. A nondescriptive representation can be thought of as a mental file in which the subject can store the information acquired in virtue of the contextual relation in question. This will typically be a *temporary* file because it exists only as long as the relation

(hence the possibility of gaining information about the object by exploiting the relation) exists. So, as long as I am in the right type of perceptual contact with the dancing man, I can think of him demonstratively. When I am no longer in a position to perceive him or to focus my attention on him, I can no longer think of him under the demonstrative concept which depends upon the existence of the right type of perceptual relation. The relation is broken, and the temporary file based on it disappears. (The information in the file is not lost, of course, but transferred into other files corresponding to the new relations in which the subject contextually stands to the object).

I said earlier that one cannot think of an object except under a mode of presentation. In the nondescriptive case, what is the mode of presentation ? It should not be equated to the properties which the thinker takes the referent to have (i.e. the properties represented in the file) but, rather, to the file itself. The file is what plays the role which Fregean theory assigns to modes of presentation. In the Fregean framework, modes of presentation provide a solution to the following puzzle : A rational subject can think of a given object a both that it is and that it is not F — how can that be ? Frege solved the problem by appealing to modes of presentation over and above the objects thought about. A rational subject can believe of a , thought of under a mode of presentation m , that it is F , and at the same time believe of the same object a , thought of under a different mode of presentation m' , that it is not F . Insofar as the modes of presentation are distinct, there is no irrationality. On the present understanding, modes of presentation are mental files : in all the relevant instances (e.g. Quine's 'Orcutt' example), the subject has two distinct files about one and the same object, and that is what enables him or her to ascribe contrary predicates to that object without (internal) contradiction.

Although they are mental particulars, mental files come into types. As we have seen, a mental file type is individuated according to its function : the function of a file of type α is to store information gained in virtue of relation R_α . In this framework there is an array of acquaintance relations, and among them, some are distinguished by the fact that certain types of file specifically correspond to them. One particular case of that sort is the 'self' file.

According to John Perry, the concept of self is a mental file that is based upon a special relation which every individual bears to himself or herself, namely identity. In virtue of *being* a certain individual, I am in a position to gain information concerning that individual in all sorts of ways in which I can gain information about no one else, e.g. through proprioception and kinaesthesia. The mental file 'self' serves as repository for information gained in this way.

On this view, *de se* thoughts are a particular case of *de re* thought. A *de se* thought is a *de re* thought about oneself, that involves a particular mode of presentation, namely a first person mode of presentation. As Frege wrote in ‘The thought’, « every one is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else » (Frege 1918-19: 25-6). I call the 'special and primitive' mode of presentation which occurs in first person thoughts 'EGO'. The EGO mode of presentation is the file in which the subject stores information gained in the first person way (a file which, in virtue of the Generality Constraint which applies to concepts, is also hospitable to information concerning the same object as information gained in the first person way — see Recanati 1993 : 123-25).

One may entertain a *de re* thought about oneself that does not involve such a mode of presentation, as in Kaplan’s famous mirror example. Kaplan’s example involves a man pointing to himself in the mirror and saying (or thinking) ‘His pants are on fire’, without realizing that he is the man whose pants are on fire. This is a *de re* thought about the thinking subject, but one that involves a demonstrative mode of presentation rather than the first person mode of presentation EGO. It is only accidentally about the subject. It contrasts with genuine *de se* thoughts, that is, thoughts which do involve the concept EGO and which one would express by using the first person : ‘My pants are on fire’.

Genuine *de se* thoughts and *de re* thoughts that are accidentally about oneself (‘accidental *de se* thoughts’, as we may call them) are not distinguished by their truth-conditions. Like all *de re* modes of presentation, the mode of presentation EGO does not affect the truth-conditions of the thought it occurs in. It follows that, if *a* points to himself in a mirror and says ‘He is *F*’, the *de re* thought he then expresses has the same truth-conditions as the *de se* thought *a* expresses by saying ‘I am *F*’: both thoughts are true iff *a* is *F*. But of course, the thoughts themselves are different, as they involve different modes of presentation — a first person mode of presentation in one case, a demonstrative, third person mode of presentation in the other. As a result, thinking one thought has very different behavioural consequences than thinking the other (see Castañeda 1999 and Perry 1993 for well-known examples).

3. Implicit *de se* thoughts

So far we have three distinctions in hand: a first distinction between descriptive thoughts and *de re* thoughts ; a second distinction, among *de re* thoughts, between those that are about oneself and those that are about something other than oneself ; and a third distinction, within

the category of *de re* thoughts about oneself, between those that are genuinely *de se* (first person thoughts, as we may call them) and those that are accidentally so. Figure 1 summarizes the three distinctions.

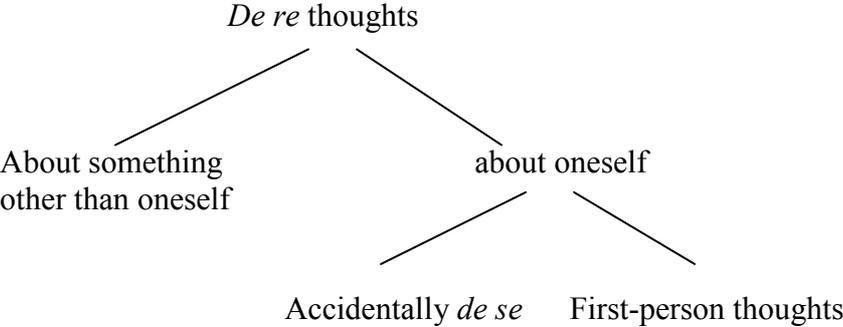


Figure 1

There is a fourth distinction, which forces us to give up the claim that first person thoughts are a variety of *de re* thoughts. As we have seen, *de re* thoughts give rise to Frege’s question: how is it possible for a rational person to think of the same object, *x*, both that it is *F* and that it is not *F*? According to the Fregean answer, that is possible because distinct modes of presentation — distinct mental files — are in play. *De re* thoughts involve two things : the *res* thought about, and the way it is thought about (the mode of presentation). The mode of presentation is the internal, psychological aspect of the thought, while the *res* thought about depends upon the external environment (since it is what stands in the right contextual relation to the subject or to the thought episode). Because of this duality, *de re* thoughts can give rise to ‘Frege cases’ (Fodor 1995), i.e. to cases in which the subject does not realize that two distinct modes of presentation contextually determine the same object as referent. Now, among first person thoughts, some are such that they do *not*, indeed *cannot*, give rise to Frege cases ; they are immune to misidentification errors and this, arguably, shows that they are not really *de re* thoughts.

Kaplan’s example, ‘His pants are on fire’, is a Frege case : the subject entertains a *de re* thought about himself, under the mode of presentation ‘that man (in the mirror)’ ; but he does not realize that it is himself that the thought is about. He wrongly believes ‘that man ≠ myself’. The opposite type of case also exists : the subject may wrongly take a current thought of his, involving a demonstrative mode of presentation, to be about himself, while the

demonstrative mode of presentation in question determines a distinct object as referent.

Wittgenstein famously discussed one such example :

It is possible that, say in an accident, I should feel a pain in my arm, see a broken arm at my side, and think it is mine, while in fact it is my neighbour's.

(Wittgenstein 1958 : 67)

In this episode the subject entertains two thoughts : 'my arm hurts' and 'that arm is broken'. The first judgment is based upon the subject's feeling of pain, the second upon his visual experience. The subject also accepts the identity 'that arm = my arm', so he judges 'my arm is broken'. This is wrong, however, because the identity 'that arm = my arm' which the subject takes for granted turns out to be false. The subject wrongly takes the visual demonstrative 'that arm' to determine his own arm (the arm that hurts) as referent, and his judgement 'my arm is broken' is based on that mistaken identification.

The fourth distinction I announced above is that which, in the passage from the *Blue Book* where he introduces the broken arm example, Wittgenstein draws between two types of first-person thought : those that are (in Shoemaker's later terminology) vulnerable to 'error through misidentification' — Wittgenstein's example being the thought 'my arm is broken' in the described circumstances — and those that are immune to such error. For example, if I feel pain and judge 'I am in pain', I cannot be mistaken as to the person who happens to be in pain. Or, to stay closer to Wittgenstein's example, I cannot be mistaken as to the person whose arm hurts when I judge 'my arm hurts' in the circumstances I have described. The two judgments, 'my arm is broken' and 'my arm hurts', behave very differently in this respect : the former is vulnerable, and the latter immune, to errors through misidentification of the relevant person.

According to Gareth Evans (1982), immunity to error through misidentification applies not only to self-ascriptions of mental properties (e.g. being in pain), but also to self-ascriptions of bodily properties : there is immunity whenever the subject's knowledge that the bodily property is instantiated is gained in the proper way. Thus if I know, from inside (through proprioception), that my legs are crossed, the judgement that my legs are crossed is immune to error through misidentification : it cannot be that I am right in judging that someone's legs are crossed, but wrong in identifying that person as myself. Contrast this with the case in which I see (in the mirror) that my legs are crossed : then I am liable to misidentification errors — I may identify the person whose legs are crossed as myself, while

it is in fact my neighbour. But when the judgment is based on proprioceptive evidence, no such mistake is possible : any information gained from inside, be it about the position of the limbs or anything else, can only be about the subject himself. That is how proprioception works.

According to Evans, and many authors following him, the relevant thoughts are immune to misidentification because they do not rest on an identification ; they are ‘identification-free’. In *Perspectival Thought*, I argued that identification-freedom characterizes thoughts that are ‘implicitly’ *de se*, as opposed to thoughts that involve an explicit self-identification. Thoughts that are implicitly *de se* involve no reference to the self at the level of content: what makes them *de se* is simply the fact that the content of the thought is evaluated with respect to the thinking subject. The subject serves as ‘circumstance of evaluation’ for the judgement, rather than being a constituent of content. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, in such cases the content of the thought is not a complete proposition ascribing a certain property to an object (viz., the subject himself/herself) : the content *is* the property, but to think the thought — or to think it in the relevant mode — is, for the subject, to self-ascribe that property (Loar 1976 : 358 ; Lewis 1979 ; Chisholm 1979, 1981).

In this framework the content of the subject’s self-ascription of pain is something like ‘pain’ or ‘there is pain’ or ‘pain is being experienced’. Being gained from inside (through introspective awareness), the information that pain is being experienced necessarily concerns pain that *the subject himself or herself* is experiencing. The judgement is about the subject not because the subject is represented in the content of the judgement, but because the experiential basis of the judgment determines its domain of application. Using the Chisholm-Lewis terminology, we can say that the content of the conscious state is not a complete proposition, but a property — the property of being in pain, which the subject of the state self-ascribes. In Evans’s example, the proprioceptive state represents the position of the limbs, but the fact that the limbs whose position is represented are *the subject’s* limbs, rather than those of some other person, is guaranteed by the proprioceptive mode. No information can be gained on that mode concerning the position of other people’s limbs. So the content of the proprioceptive state can be construed as, simply, the bodily property (one’s legs being crossed). It is the mode of the state, rather than its content, which licenses the (self-) ascription of that property to the subject of the state. By contrast, an explicit *de se* thought is a thought the *content* of which involves an ‘identification component’, through which the object thought about is identified as oneself (EGO). The subject who sees himself in the mirror and

thinks ‘my legs are crossed’ entertains such a thought, and explicitly thinks of the person whose legs are crossed as being himself.

The notion of an implicit *de se* thought in which the self is not represented explicitly (Perry 1986) is important not only to understand the phenomenon of immunity to error through misidentification, but also to understand the concept of self that occurs in explicit *de se* thoughts. Indeed, the ability to entertain implicit *de se* thoughts is arguably a necessary condition for anyone to evolve the concept EGO. That is so because, as I have already mentioned, the concept EGO is best construed as a repository for information gained in the first person way (as well as for any information that is known or believed to be about the same object as information gained in this way). Now a piece of information is gained ‘in the first person way’ or ‘from inside’ if and only if it is the content of an implicit *de se* thought. It follows that the first step in an elucidation of the concept of self is a correct analysis of the functioning of implicit *de se* thoughts.

Nozick has criticized the approach to *de se* thoughts in terms of an internal (first person) way of gaining information, on the following grounds :

We might imagine there is some way of observing ourselves which cannot be used to observe anything else. On this view, I know it is I who is in pain, for example, by observing in that particular way that someone is in pain. (...) This does not fit easily knowing nonpsychological statements that are reflexively self-referring (as my knowing I was born in Brooklyn, New York). (...) Reflexive access to ourselves, then, cannot be a special mode of relating to ourselves as objects (Nozick 1981 : 81).

I dispose of this objection by taking implicit *de se* thoughts as explainable in terms of the internal/first person way of gaining information, and explicit *de se* thoughts (such as the thought that one was born at such and such a place, as in Nozick’s example) as explainable in terms of the concept EGO, which itself is explainable in terms of implicit *de se* thoughts.

So not all *de se* thoughts are *de re* thoughts. Implicit *de se* thoughts are not. Their content isthetic, while the content of *de re* thoughts is categoric. Admittedly, explicit *de se* thoughts are a sort of *de re* thought : they are *de re* thoughts that involve a special mode of presentation of the *res* thought about, namely the EGO mode of presentation. Like all *de re* thoughts, explicit *de se* thoughts are subject to misidentification errors, as in Wittgenstein’s broken arm example. But implicit *de se* thoughts are immune to such errors, because they do

not involve an identification. In contrast to *de re* thoughts, they do not give rise to Frege cases. Only *de se* thoughts in which the self is represented explicitly give rise to Frege cases.

We end up with a more complex classification (Figure 2), with three types of *de se* thought instead of merely two, as in Figure 1.

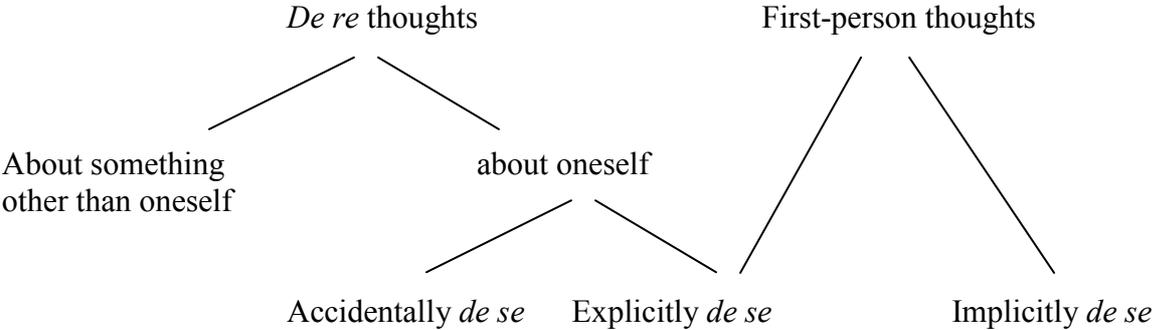


Figure 2

First, there are accidental *de se* thoughts, namely *de re* thoughts about an individual *x* who happens to be oneself. Second, there are ‘essential’ or ‘genuine’ *de se* thoughts — the sort of thought one might express by using the first person. In this category we must distinguish between explicit and implicit *de se* thoughts. Explicit *de se* thoughts give rise to Frege cases and their content is categoric, like that of *de re* thoughts in general. The content of implicit *de se* thoughts isthetic (identification-free), and for that reason they are immune to error through misidentification.

4. *De re* thought as a species of (implicit) *de se* thought

We are left with two irreducible categories : the category of *de re* thoughts, and the category of first person thoughts. They overlap, for there is one type of first person thought, namely explicit *de se* thoughts, that is also a type of *de re* thought. But first person thoughts in general cannot be reduced to a variety of *de re* thought. *De re* and *de se* simply don’t unify.

Or do they ? David Lewis’s work suggests a different way of achieving unification. In ‘Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*’ (section XII), he compares his account of indexical belief with that of Perry, and he puts the matter thus : For Perry, *de se* thought is a variety of *de re* thought ; for Lewis, *de re* reduces to *de se*. Lewis summarizes Perry’s position as follows:

Perry's scheme (...) provides, in the most straightforward way possible, for other-ascription as well as self-ascription of properties. Ascription of properties to individuals, in general, is called belief *de re*. Perry's scheme is made for belief *de re*, and belief *de se* falls under that as a special case. (Lewis 1979/1983 : 151-2)

For Lewis, however, « The subject's self-ascriptions are the whole of his system of beliefs. Other-ascriptions of properties are not some further beliefs alongside the self-ascriptions », but a particular case of self-ascription.

We have seen that a nondescriptive mode of presentation of the sort that occurs in *de re* thoughts is constitutively associated with a certain relation R to objects, an 'acquaintance relation' whose obtaining creates an information link that the subject can exploit. When I think a *de re* thought to the effect that a certain object is F , and the object in question is thought of under a mode of presentation m based upon a certain relation R_m to that object, what I do, according to Lewis, is *self-ascribe the property of standing in relation R_m to an x that is F* . For example, to think 'That is F ' is to self-ascribe the property of standing in the demonstrative relation R_{dem} to some object x that is F (Lewis 1979/1983 : 154-55).

To take the crucial distinction between implicit and explicit *de se* thoughts on board, Lewis' claim should be rephrased as follows. *De re* thought is a species of *implicit de se* thought. The self's involvement is implicit, because it is determined by the belief mode (construed as a self-ascriptive mode). Since it is determined by the belief mode, every belief, whatever its content, turns out to be *de se*. Whether the subject thinks 'I am hot', 'That is gigantic', or 'Ice melts', in all cases the subject self-ascribes a property : the property of being hot, the property of being R_{dem} -related to an object x that is gigantic, or the property of inhabiting a possible world in which ice melts. What about the other type of *de se* thought, i.e the case in which the subject explicitly thinks about himself/herself ? What about a thought like 'I was born in Brooklyn' ? We can maintain, with Perry, that such thoughts are a species of *de re* thought, involving a special relation R_{ego} to the *res* the thought is about. If this is right, then an explicit *de se* thought (e.g. the thought that one was born in Brooklyn) is itself a variety of implicit *de se* thought : to believe that one was born in Brooklyn is to self-ascribe the property of being R_{ego} -related to an x such that x was born in Brooklyn. Since the R_{ego} -relation is the relation of identity, is it easy to overlook the difference between self-ascribing the property of being F and self-ascribing the property of being R_{ego} -related to an x such that x is F . But there is a significant difference : in one case but not in the other, the object of which

being F is predicated is explicitly identified, and can be mis-identified. This is enough to justify talk of ‘modes of presentation’.

On this view, summarized in Figure 3, there is a sense in which *de se* thought is a special case of *de re* thought, but there is also a sense in which *de re* thought is a special case of *de se* thought. The apparent tension between Perry’s and Lewis’s perspectives can be alleviated by paying attention to the crucial distinction between implicit and explicit *de se* thoughts.

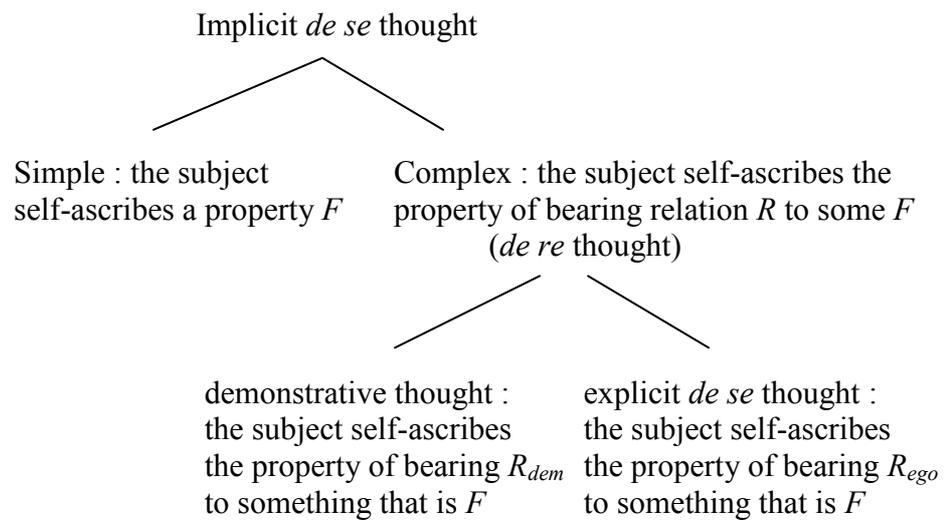


Figure 3

Every thought now is an implicit *de se* thought. The simplest of such thoughts are the self-ascriptions of properties like being hot or being hungry. But more complex properties can be involved, like the property of seeing an object that is *F*, or more generally the property of standing in a contextual relation *R* to some object that is *F*. Thus *de re* thoughts turn out to be a species of implicit *de se* thought. Still, we can maintain that explicit *de se* thoughts are themselves a species of *de re* thought, involving the relation R_{ego} to the *res* the thought is about. Demonstrative thoughts are another species of *de re* thought, involving the relation R_{dem} to the *res* the thought is about. If the *res* in question (the thing to which the subject is demonstratively related) turns out to be the subject himself/herself, as in Kaplan’s example, the *de re* thought is accidentally *de se*.

5. Why internalize contextual relations ?

Following Kaplan's early suggestion (Kaplan 1969), Lewis internalizes the acquaintance relations, making them part of content. A major problem I see with that theory is that it entails, or seems to entail, that the subject is able to think of the contextual relation R in which he or she stands to the object of his/her thought. This entailment is absent from the pure 'mode of presentation' view I presented earlier (§2). The view in question simply says that the subject thinking a *de re* thought exercises a mental file, whose existence is contingent upon a certain relation R to the object. The subject need not be aware of that relation, or be able to articulate it. So for example the relation can be that which holds when a Kripkean causal chain links me to Cicero. We may be reluctant to say that the subject who believes that Cicero was rich thereby self-ascribes the property of being related to some rich individual x by a K-causal chain involving his use of the name 'Cicero', since the subject presumably lacks the notion of a K-causal chain.

This objection can perhaps be met, by assuming that the relevant relation to Cicero is thought of through the description 'the one I heard of under the name *Cicero*'. This seems to have been Lewis's view (1979/1983 : 155). Be that as it may, it is unclear that we can put the acquaintance relations inside the content of thought, as Lewis does, without giving up the very idea of a 'nondescriptive' thought.

The anti-descriptivist position which became dominant in the seventies holds that, in an important class of cases, objects of thought are determined externally via relations which the thought tokens bear to objects given in the context of tokening. Descriptivism is the contrary view that the objects a thought is about uniformly are the objects which possess certain properties represented in the content of the thought. As Kent Bach (1987) nicely put it, reference determination is construed as uniformly *satisfactional* on the descriptivist picture, while the nondescriptivist picture makes room for *relational* determination as well. Now there is a revised descriptivist position, which incorporates some of the insights of nondescriptivism. According to that position, contextual relations between the thought token and its objects do play a role in reference determination but (when they do) they are reflected in the content of the thought. Reference determination thus turns out to be *satisfactional* even when it is relational. This view internalizes the contextual relations, making them part of the content of the thought, instead of construing them as external to content. It is clear that the Lewis-inspired theory is an instance of that view.

Note that relations are involved, and may be internalized or not, even when no singular ‘mode of presentation’ occurs in the subject’s thought. Take the case of proprioception. On the view I have put forward, the content of a proprioceptive state is simply the relevant bodily property, or the fact that that property is instantiated. The fact that it is instantiated *in the subject of the state* (e.g. the fact that *the subject’s legs* are crossed) is not represented — the thought is implicitly rather than explicitly *de se*. Still a certain relation *R* is involved. The property that is the content of the state bears a certain relation to the subject of the state: the subject of the proprioceptive state *instantiates* that property. An advocate of the internalization strategy might want to make that relation part of the content of the state. Thus the view I call ‘reflexivism’ (a view which, in *Perspectival Thought*, I ascribe to Searle and Higginbotham) would, in such a case, yield the following analysis : the content of the state involves not only the property, but also the subject of the state and the subject’s relation to the property. In the reflexivist framework, the content of a proprioceptive state is the token-reflexive proposition that *the subject of the state possesses the relevant property*. This analysis applies to all the ‘simple’ cases according to the classification in Figure 3 : on the reflexivist picture, the content of the state I am in when I feel hot is the proposition that *the subject of this state is hot*.

If we turn to the case of external perception, a similar process of internalization takes place in the reflexivist framework. When I see the man dance frantically, the content of my perceptual state, according to the reflexivist, is not just the event of his dancing frantically or the proposition that he dances frantically, but the more complex proposition that *he dances frantically and his so doing causes this perceptual state* (Searle 1983). The subject’s epistemic relation to the perceived state of affairs is an additional component of the content of the perceptual state.

The reflexivist analysis raises the same objection as Lewis’s internalization of acquaintance relations. It presupposes that the subject has the resources for representing (i) the state, (ii) the subject of the state, and (iii) the relation between the subject of the state and the state of affairs it represents. Now it is certainly possible for the subject (a child, say) to see a man dance like mad — and even to see *that* he dances like mad — without having the conceptual resources for representing any of these things.

Lewis’s move is similar to the reflexivist’s, but, unlike the reflexivist, he does not internalize *everything*. The self-ascriptive bit, for Lewis, is not an aspect of content, but something external to content. The content of a thought is a property, and the (self-)ascription of that property to the subject of the thought is not a further aspect of the content of the

thought, but something that remains external to content. This raises the following question : What is the motivation behind Lewis's differential attitude towards the subject's relation to the content of her thought, which relation remains external on the Lewisian account, and the contextual relations he is willing to internalize ?

For Lewis, in what I called the simple cases (e.g. feeling hot), the content is the property, and the subject of the state self-ascribes the property. So the relation between the property that is the content of the state and the subject of the state is not itself part of the content of the state. In the complex cases, however, it is. If, on the basis of his current perception, the subject thinks 'that man dances frantically', the seeing relation that relates the subject to the man and his dance is made part of the content. The content of the state includes what the subject sees, namely a certain scene (the man dancing frantically), but it additionally involves the relation between the subject and that scene. Overall, the content of the state, for Lewis, is the property of seeing the man dance frantically, or, rather, the property of being perceptually related to a man and seeing him dance frantically. However the details are spelled out, Lewis makes the relation between the subject of the state and the scene that features in its content an additional part of its content, while in the simple case, only the property is part of the content : the relation between the subject and the property isn't. So, in Lewis's framework, there is a clear asymmetry between the simple cases and the complex cases. Why ?

The reason why Lewis chooses to make the relation part of the content in some cases but not others is, I submit, that he takes all representations to be about the subject at the time of tokening. There is only one mode of thought for Lewis — the egocentric mode. This imposes a rather severe constraint : the content of all representations must be a property ascribable to the subject at the time of thinking. In the simple cases, when e.g. the subject feels pain or feels hot, the property which the state represents (being in pain, being hot) is a suitable candidate for self-ascription, so nothing objects to treating it as the content of the state. In the complex cases, however, a singular state of affairs is represented and that can be 'self-ascribed' only by being first converted into a property ascribable to the subject of the state. Incorporating the relation between the subject and the state of affairs into the content effects the required conversion : instead of an unascrivable state of affairs (the man dancing frantically) we get an ascribable property (seeing the man dance frantically), as the theory demands. So my hunch is that Lewis internalizes because of his commitment to Egocentrism (the view that all thoughts are in the egocentric mode).

Departing from Lewis, I reject Egocentrism. I accept a plurality of modes, some of which are not egocentric. Memory is a case in point. A representation in the memory mode is to be evaluated with respect to a past situation of perception. That means that the state of affairs that is its content must hold, not in the subject's current situation (the context of tokening), but in an earlier situation. On this view, a memory may well inherit the content of the perception from which it causally derives : the difference between them is a difference in the relevant circumstances of evaluation which the perception mode and the memory mode respectively impose, rather than a difference in content. For Lewis, given his commitment to Egocentrism, such an analysis is ruled out. The content of the memory cannot be simply the state of affairs which the subject remembers (i.e. the very state of affairs which the subject experienced in the past). In virtue of Egocentrism, the content of the state must be evaluated with respect to the subject of the state at the time of the state ; but the remembered state of affairs does not hold at the time of the memory state (i.e. the time at which the subject remembers). Incorporating the subject's relation to the state of affairs remembered into the content of the memory state provides a way out. When I remember the man dancing frantically, the content of the memory, for Lewis, is not the state of affairs — the man dancing frantically — but the (currently instantiated) property of *having experienced* that state of affairs.

As soon as we give up Egocentrism, a symmetric approach to simple and complex cases becomes available. In *Perspectival Thought*, I sketched such an approach. The content of the proprioceptive state in Evans's example is said to be the property that one's legs are crossed. The instantiation relation between the subject of the state and the property that is the content of the state is not represented but the proprioceptive mode imposes the subject as circumstance of evaluation for the content, and that means that the state is veridical if and only if the property is instantiated *in/by the subject*. Exactly the same thing is true in the more complex cases. So when I see the man dance frantically, the singular content of the perceptual judgement is a state of affairs involving the man and the property of dancing frantically. The subject of the state is perceptually related to the state of affairs, or must be if the state is to count as a true perception, but the perceptual relation is no more part of the content of the state in this case than the instantiation relation was part of the content in the previous case. In both cases the relation is implied by the mode : the state that represents the man dancing frantically counts as a true perception only if the state of affairs which is the content of the state holds *in the subject's perceptual situation*, i.e. only if it affects the subject's senses,

causing his representation of the state of affairs.¹ So the perceptual relation must hold for the state to be veridical in the full-blooded sense, but this does not make the perceptual relation itself part of the content of the state. That the subject must be causally related, through perception, to the state of affairs that is the content of the state is part of what makes the state in question a *perceptual state* rather than a state in some other mode.

Table 1 summarizes the three competing positions regarding the content of perceptual states. I use Higginbotham’s notation ‘ $\sigma(e)$ ’ to stand for the subject of the perceptual state, ‘ p ’ to stand for the perceived state of affairs, and ‘ R ’ to stand for the appropriate relation between the subject of perception and that state of affairs.

Table 1

Reflexivism	$\sigma(e) R p$
Lewis 1979	$R p$
<i>Perspectival Thought</i>	p

The reflexivist and Lewis both face the objection that they put into the content something that the subject may not be able to represent ; something, moreover, that does *not* have to be put into the content since it can be handled at some other level of analysis (the level of mode). Note that, in contrast to the reflexivist, Lewis’s theory of attitudes *de se* makes room for an external component affecting truth-conditions. This enables him e.g. to account for the Heimson/Hume case discussed by Perry (Perry 1977). According to Lewis, David Hume and the madman Heimson who believes himself to be Hume believe the same thing. Their common belief content is a property which they both self-ascribe — the property of being Hume. Yet, because of the external self-ascriptive component, one thought is true and the other false even though, internally, they are ‘the same thought’. What I suggest is to pursue this type of analysis more systematically, by externalizing not only the self-ascriptive subject but also the relation between the subject of a perceptual state and the singular state of affairs it

¹ Unless the perceptual relation holds between the state of affairs that is the content of the state and the subject of the state, the state will not count as veridical in the full-blooded sense even if the state of affairs obtains. For example, if the subject is blind but visually hallucinates a man dancing frantically, the state will not count as veridical in the full blooded sense (it will not be a true perception) even if it happens that a man is indeed dancing frantically in front of the subject, since that state of affairs will not actually cause the subject’s representation of it.

represents. What prevents Lewis from so doing is only his adherence to Egocentrism, a view which I think should be rejected anyway. If we give up on Egocentrism, no good reason is left for internalizing the contextual relations, be they local acquaintance relations underpinning nondescriptive modes of presentation or more global relations imposed by the mode.*

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