Thinking of Particulars

Octavian A. Busuioc, Queen’s University

We aim at objectivity in both day to day and scientific inquiry. In aiming at objectivity, our targets are both getting the facts about the world right and communicating our knowledge to others. Central to this epistemological ideal is a notion of a particular object. Objects are the things that bear properties and stand in relations to one another so as to form states of affairs and, ultimately, a world. This notion of particulars sparks a desire to distinguish between thoughts of particulars and thoughts that are only general. This distinction between thoughts is made in terms of both semantic structure and semantic, mental, content. In the literature, it is known as the de re and de dicto distinction. In the case of mental content, there arise notions of conceptual and non-conceptual content. In the following, I explore these notions as they relate to two different interpretations of Fregean sense that diverge in their interpretation of sense as descriptive or non-descriptive. I argue that a descriptive notion of sense forces one to postulate non-conceptual content, which I further argue is an untenable position. I ultimately provide an alternative account to what I ascertain to be a dilemma in the current literature on de re thought. In §I, I introduce the de re and de dicto distinction. In §II, I discuss the attraction of non-conceptual content in making this distinction, which is precluded by a descriptivist reading of Fregean sense. I focus mostly on Tyler Burge’s account, presented in “Belief De Re,” and John McDowell’s reply, in “De Re Senses.” In §III, I discuss how one can distance oneself from the descriptivist reading of Frege in a way that undercuts the need for non-conceptual content in articulating the de re/de dicto distinction. I focus primarily on Gareth Evans’ account of Fregean senses, and on David Kaplan’s account in “Dthat.” In §IV, I turn my attention to the upshot of a non-descriptive understanding of Fregean sense: de re thought without non-conceptual content. Upon recognizing a dilemma in the current literature on de re thought, analogous to the oscillation identified and discussed by McDowell in Mind and World between the Myth of the Given and Coherentism, I conclude that a satisfactory articulation of the de re/de dicto distinction may require an analogous move.

§I.

Consider a modified version of W.V.O. Quine’s example: “Isabelle believes that someone is a spy.” Isabelle may have two different beliefs. She may believe de re of someone in particular that he is a spy or, she may believe de dicto that there is someone out there that is a spy, but not have
anyone in particular in mind – in other words, she may believe, de dicto, that spies exist. The ambiguity of the word ‘someone’ brings out a distinction in logical form and it is important to recognize the articulation of different logical structures underlying the sentence. But, it is also important to recognize that the status of de re thought bears deeply on our habitation of a world and our interactions within it. A satisfactory account of the de re/de dicto distinction must go beyond logical structure in order to articulate the core of our interest in it.

One way to go further is to reflect on requirements an individual must meet to entertain de re thoughts. An account of this sort can be found in David Kaplan’s “Quantifying In,” where Kaplan requires three relations to an object to hold in order for a thinker to entertain de re thoughts of that object. While Kaplan’s requirements are insightful because they provide the contextual elements that must be met in order to ascribe a de re thought, they do not shed light on the difference in mental content between de re and de dicto thoughts. Kaplan subsequently moved away from the approach of “Quantifying In” and towards a notion of singular thought as a means to characterize what is expressed by de re expressions. Singular thought can be described as thought which contains an object. Kaplan makes this explicit, with a little humor: “John himself, right there, trapped in the proposition.” Singular thoughts are usually contrasted with general thoughts. In the example of Isabelle, general thoughts are exemplified by the second case, where ‘someone’ in ‘someone is a spy’ is interpreted as a general term. Talk of objects trapped in thoughts may sound odd, and it should sound odd, but it has been mostly used as a façon de parler for thoughts that contain some type of non-conceptual content.

The literature reveals that in the case of particulars, non-conceptual content is attractive quite apart from concerns about articulating the de re/de dicto distinction. Non-conceptual content is often employed to satisfy a desire to distinguish between oneself and the world by way of a distinction between the conceptual mental content of an individual and the non-conceptual perceptual content impinged upon the individual by the world. What prompts a move towards thought of particulars can be characterized in Strawsonian terms. Strawson can be understood as arguing that if we cannot make sense of thought connecting with particulars, then it is unclear how we can make sense of a world. If one cannot distinguish between oneself and what is not oneself, one slips into idealism: general thought exhausts all thought, and we never go beyond the general. In order to avoid idealism, we must account for thoughts connecting with the world in such a way as to be thoughts of particular, non-general, mind-independent objects. As I shall argue later on, the main source of the difficulties in articulating such an account is conceiving of thought as conceptual in a descriptivist interpretation of sense. Discussion in the literature on de re thought has mostly followed this descriptivist trend.
The descriptivist interpretation of Frege equates the conceptual with the predicative, and thought is equated with what is conceptual. No particular appears in a thought, but rather one can think particular-like thoughts by entertaining definite descriptions which pick out one and only one object in the world. The lesser worry here is that thoughts pick out an object only accidentally. For example, in the actual world, the description expressed by “the teacher of Alexander the Great” singles out Aristotle. But, we could think of a possible world where that very description singles out Plato. This does not mesh well with our intuitions about proper names. The greater worry here is that on the descriptive picture of names it is difficult to make sense of particulars, because a thought contains only concepts which we believe are instantiated by objects. As such, we are left with only a negative commitment to particulars at best and a leap of faith at worst. It is as though our thoughts reach out to something they cannot get a grip on.

In “Concept and Object,” Frege seems to equate the conceptual with what is expressed by predicate terms. From this apparent equation, some have inferred that only what is expressed by predicative terms is conceptual. This limitation entails that the conceptual should be equated with the predicative. For Frege, all that is grasped is sense which is conceptual and so for this reason, I suspect, Frege has been interpreted as a descriptivist about mental content. On this descriptivist interpretation, there is no room in thought for a res.

For a descriptivist, such as the early Russell, names are abbreviations for definite descriptions. For Russell, what an ordinary name expresses is a cluster of properties that may or may not be satisfied by an object. Russell treats names as definite descriptions because we know that one cannot always be in a relation of acquaintance with the objects ordinary names supposedly denote. Thus, on Russell's view, thoughts expressed using ordinary names are general de dicto thoughts. However, Russell allows for logically proper names, such as demonstratives, that directly latch onto objects as long as one is in a relation of acquaintance with them. For a demonstrative expression to make a semantic contribution when used in an utterance, one must be in a relation of acquaintance with an object. It is only in these cases that thoughts are de re. Demonstrative expressions so conceived are incompatible with the descriptivist Fregean interpretation. Because they latch onto their objects directly, the content expressed by demonstratives is not descriptive. Since senses are interpreted as descriptive, and since demonstratives are not descriptive, then the latter either do not have a sense, or the sense is not part of the expressed proposition. However, if the content expressed by a demonstrative is not a sense, then what is expressed is not conceptual. Thus, the content must be non-conceptual content. It appears that by using only a descriptivist interpretation of Fregean sense, we arrive at postulating non-conceptual content. However, as I shall discuss further in §III, the root of the interpretation, a descriptivist reading of Frege on sense and reference, is misleading at best.
§II.

Non-conceptual content is sometimes described as that which we are given in experience. It can either figure as a part of thought, or it may be conceptualized, that is, it is structured by one’s conceptual capacities. In “Belief De Re,” Tyler Burge articulates the de re/de dicto distinction in terms of conceptual and non-conceptual content. Burge argues that non-conceptual, contextual elements complete de re thoughts. He arrives at this conclusion by reflecting on the use of demonstratives. On the Fregean theory, sense determines an object (referent) independently of context. This follows from Frege’s claim that sense determines reference and does so regardless of the time of utterance. Demonstrative expressions in part express something stable across utterances, and are thus timeless in a weak sense. That stable something has come to be known as the character of demonstratives. Following Kaplan, one can think of the character of a demonstrative as rules for its use, which only when combined with a context can be constitutive of a sentence that expresses a thought. Burge notes that without the contextual element, a demonstrative fails to express. Furthermore, he notes that these contextual elements are not conceptual and do not figure in the sense of an utterance – rather, they complete the sense non-conceptually. Burge’s idea is that the world inhabited by the speaker provides these contextual elements, not Fregean mental content.

Burge appeals to the richness of experience to support this claim. He claims that it is obvious that we lack concepts for every degree of cold that one may experience on a frigid day. While demonstratives can be employed to express thoughts about particular degrees of cold, Burge claims there is no reason to think that what is expressed by a demonstrative is wholly conceptual in character. For Burge, conceptual capacities do not cut the mustard when it comes to individuating objects of thought. For example, one may think of a particularly frigid wind even when the details of its sensible qualities fade, taking with them the individuating criteria. This example persuades Burge that there are non-conceptual relations that help express a thought, even when the descriptive element is not definite. This conclusion means that by itself, sense is insufficient to individuate the purported referent. But this conclusion is also a result of a descriptive theory of sense as criterion of individuation, because sense is equated with the individuating criterion of an object and individuating criteria are supposed to be descriptive.

One way to account for the apparent shortcomings of conceptual capacities is to appeal to linguistic limitations. Just because we do not have a word to express a particular frigid wind without using a demonstrative does not mean that we do not have conceptual capacities to think of it. Burge attributes this response, with which he is dissatisfied, to the Frege-Carnap tradition. I am not persuaded by the reason Burge gives this argument for his dissatisfaction. When discussing the demonstrative introductions of names, Burge writes: “there’s no intuitive substance to the claim that
such names express complete concepts.” Considering the nature of Burge’s claim, the most I can do is give a motivation for thinking that there is such intuitive substance. If Burge is correct, it is unclear how to make sense of the introduction of a concept-term, in a case where an individual does not already have the intended concept. The case of color concepts is especially germane: all that is required to grasp a color concept is to open one’s eyes and direct one’s attention to a patch of color. Given the rich inferences that one can draw from such a visual experience, I find any account that requires more suspect. For example, when experiencing a novel shade of red one may say: “this is the color that I wish to paint my living room,” or “this is darker than the color of my couch.” Full-blown conceptual content is involved in these examples because one draws inferences from this content. This would be impossible if the content were non-conceptual. We infer that one does not have a concept precisely when one cannot draw proper inferences. And if one can draw inferences from non-conceptual content that are as rich as one can draw from conceptual content, then it would be unclear what the difference is between conceptual and non-conceptual content.

According to Burge, when the non-conceptual part of a thought is left un-conceptualized, the thought is de re. But Burge’s view hinges upon a descriptive interpretation of Frege, and if this interpretation can be resisted, then the attractiveness of non-conceptual content should vanish. By debunking this interpretation, we uncover another way to stop the uncomfortable oscillation between non-conceptual content (from which we can somehow draw inferences) and a view that equates the mental with the descriptive and leaves us worldless. This uncomfortable oscillation regarding de re thought is the thought behind McDowell’s *Mind and World*: namely, to break away from the vicious oscillation between the The Myth of the Given and Coherentism. Next, I will discuss how Gareth Evans’ interpretation of Frege and McDowell’s response to Burge can be used to debunk this mis-reading of Frege. I also draw on Kaplan’s account in “Dthat,” as an example of a descriptive interpretation of Fregean sense.

§III.

The interpretation of Frege which equates sense with descriptive content is wide-spread. It is fueled by some of Frege’s own remarks. The most salient of these remarks appears in a footnote, where Frege seems to equate the sense of the name ‘Aristotle’ with two different definite descriptions.

Kaplan’s interpretation of Frege begins with the following: “I think it reasonable to interpret Frege as saying that the sense of a sign is what is grasped by the linguistically competent auditor, and it seems natural to generalize and say that it is the ‘sense’ of the demonstration that is grasped by the competent auditor of utterances containing demonstratives.” He then proceeds to equate the sense
of the demonstrative ‘that’ with a description: “That [the speaker points at Phosphorus in early morning].”

For Kaplan, the sense expressed, and what the hearer grasps by a demonstrative expression, is the indication analyzed as a description that individuates the object of thought. From this, Kaplan makes the natural move in this type of interpretation and claims that sense can only lead to general propositional content: “...a special singular form of proposition-into the Fregean mold of linguistic elements with a sense and a denotation, the sense being the element which appears in the proposition (thus leaving us with only general propositions).” Kaplan infers this descriptivist interpretation from Feigl's translation of Frege in the following passage: “the sense (connotation, meaning) of the sign in which is contained the manner and context of presentation of the denotation of the sign.”

Evans argues that views like Kaplan’s overlook Frege's careful distinction between descriptions and modes of presentation. Frege’s intention is not that what a name expresses (i.e., its sense) is descriptive. Rather, Frege’s idea is that when we think of an object, we think of it in a particular way. It is these particular ways of thinking of objects that are modes of presentation, that is, sense. Treating senses as modes of presentation is different from claiming that what is grasped are descriptions that may be satisfied by other objects if it were not for contextual non-conceptual elements. Evans presses his point that a mode of presentation, not a description, enters thought when he writes: “it may be a property of a singular term as an element of public language that, in order to understand utterances containing it one must not only think of a particular object, its Meaning, but must think of that object in a particular way.” Evans’ point is exemplified by reflecting on different ways one may perceive an object through different modalities. The case of different visual perspectives is especially clear, because we each see objects from unique perspectives that are available to all with properly functioning sensory organs. To adopt one of these points of view, one only has to take up the right position in the world and direct one’s attention in the right direction. In other words, one only has to take up the intended point of view. This is consistent with Kaplan’s quote from Feigl's translation of Frege above. By saying that what is contained in sense is a context of presentation, one is not bound to anything descriptive. Rather, one is only bound to overlapping egocentric spaces. That after all is context, something contained in one’s egocentric space enabling de re demonstrative thoughts to be grasped and expressed. The thought I have of a painting, let’s say “Hegel’s Holiday” by Magritte, when viewing it from behind will be different from a thought I have of it while viewing it from the front. I can ascertain this because I can draw different inferences from each of these different modes of presentation. From the former, I might infer that the canvas used is of high grade. From the latter, I infer that it is a Magritte. And if these thoughts are of an object thought of in a particular way, there is no room for concern that the thought may be satisfied by another object or no object (which were the previous lesser and greater
worries). Modes of presentation, unlike definite descriptions, do not latch onto objects by descriptive means. The inference that I draw about the canvas is an inference drawn from the mode of presentation contained in the sense of “Hegel’s Holiday.” I draw the inference that it is a Magritte from a different mode of presentation that is also contained in the very same egocentric sense. Modes of presentation are deeply tied to an object in a way that descriptions are not: if there is no object, then there is no mode of presentation; neither does it make sense to speak of a mode of presentation being of two different objects.

I find Kaplan's picture theory apt in explicating the idea of a mode of presentation. A picture is tied in the same deep way to what or whom it is a picture of, as a mode of presentation is tied to the object it is a mode of presentation of. No matter how much a picture resembles an individual, that is no guarantee that it is a picture of that individual. For example, while a picture of Donald Davidson may have a striking resemblance to my distant uncle, that does not make it a picture of my distant uncle. Likewise, if we take two identical twins, Ted and Ben, and look at a picture of Ben, no matter how much the picture resembles Ted (uncannily in this case), it is not a picture of Ted. Mutatis mutandis for modes of presentation. This non-descriptive interpretation of sense guarantees one of Frege’s most important features of sense, that it determines reference.

In the case of demonstrative expressions the point is especially clear. To grasp a thought expressed using a demonstrative, one must not only listen, but also perform an action. Pointing a finger towards an object provides the interlocutor a direction for their attention. If one’s attention is successfully turned, one will grasp the intended thought. It is important to recognize that if the interlocutor merely grasped the descriptive character of a demonstrative, she would not grasp the thought the speaker intended to express.

§IV.

So what road of inquiry is open to us? I mentioned above that taking the non-conceptual path in elucidating de re thought is unsatisfactory, because it is unclear how we are able to draw the rich inferences we do from purported non-conceptual content. The wholly descriptive path is equally unsatisfactory, because we could no longer account for particulars, so neither could we account for de re thought. This unsatisfactory account was why the descriptivist reading of Frege led to postulating non-conceptual content. As I noted at the outset, this dilemma parallels McDowell's discussion of an uncomfortable oscillation in the literature on the connection between mind and world. McDowell articulates an alternative account on the basis of which we can construct a satisfactory account of the de re/de dicto distinction.
Experience can be said to be paradigmatically de re, because our experiences are of states of affairs and thus of particular things in the world, be they chairs, individuals or patches of color and so on.\textsuperscript{39} It seems impossible to correctly describe one’s experience as only general in character.\textsuperscript{40} Borrowing a line from Kant, McDowell conceives of spontaneity as active thought and passivity as passive experience of the world. Unlike Kant, who held that experience is something we actively conceptualize, McDowell argues that experience is conceptually permeated from the start, and it differs from spontaneity only in its passive character, that is, there is no mental action required of a thinker in passivity. He argues for this while considering an oscillation between the Myth of the Given (a view on which it is unclear how we can make sense of experience playing a veridical role in our reasoning) and Coherentism (a view on which it is unclear how thought is in touch with the world).\textsuperscript{41} In McDowell's view, experience, while passive, is non-general and conceptual all the way down.

To understand what it is to entertain a de re thought, we must reflect on the mental content that is expressed by the subject term of de re sentences. I propose that it is a Fregean mode of presentation.\textsuperscript{42} Modes of presentation are not non-conceptual and their tie to the object they present is deep and unbreakable. In de dicto thought, it is a description that enters one’s thought, not an object under a mode of presentation.\textsuperscript{43} As previously discussed, descriptions provide no tie to the objects by which they are satisfied. The distinction between de re and de dicto thought thus has to do with whether there is a tie between the content of the thinker’s thought and the object presented in a particular way.

In order to entertain de re thoughts, we must also have an ability to keep track of their objects.\textsuperscript{44} And indeed, we have means to track objects through modes of presentation: (1) either with our senses, or (2) we can commit them to memory, from where we can recall modes of presentation, or (3) we can introduce a name for the object presented in a certain way. Keeping track with our perceptual capacities will be a temporary tracking, committing them to memory and introducing a name are longer lasting. Through any one of these three means we may entertain a variety of de re thoughts in free thought, ascribing various properties to an object.\textsuperscript{45} But, whenever we entertain a thought of an object, we are always going to think of it in a particular way, thus under a mode of presentation.

The most difficult task is to account for communication, and this is not something I will be able to do any justice to here. I have hinted before at how this works in the case of demonstratives: one merely has to direct one’s point of view in the world to grasp what is expressed by a demonstrative. Accounting for our use of names is more difficult and requires more work than I can undertake here. A way to get started may be to reflect on deferred tracking. The idea is that what a name does is pass on the tracking of an object down a line of individuals while a mode of
presentation is expressed and grasped. This explains intuitions expressed by Saul Kripke in what has come to be known as “the causal theory of (proper) names,” and even better by Evans in his discussion of information-based thought.

I have shown that a descriptive reading of Frege results in the postulation of non-conceptual content once faced with de re thought. Such a view is not ultimately tenable, because it is unclear how one may draw the rich inferences that one commonly does from purported non-conceptual content. On the other hand, taking up the same view without requiring particulars seems to completely erase our notion of a world. Thus, if these are all our options, we have a dilemma. I have suggested a way out: eschew non-conceptual content when accounting for de re thought by not interpreting sense as descriptive. Living in, and interacting with, a world is not a descriptive exercise. If it were, we would slip into transcendental idealism at best and idealism at worst. Transcendental idealism arises once we ask “what satisfies our subject-term descriptions as to make our propositions true?”, and are left with the answer that it must be something. This, to a certain extent, is the same point that Kant makes: experience must be experience of something. But this option ends up leaving us reaching for something we cannot get a grasp of, and it also leaves us with only general de dicto thought and a lacking account of particulars. Some philosophers have recognized this result and felt attracted to non-conceptual content. But the reason for this attraction is that they believe conceptual capacities are analogous to descriptive abilities. But while indeed the vaster our conceptual capacities become, the vaster our descriptive abilities are, the two are at best loosely correlated.
Notes

1 This paper owes much to David Bakhurst, Gurpreet Rattan, and Patrick Q. Moran, for both insight and patience. I would also like to thank Casey Woodling for an illuminating and challenging commentary and the editors of the Florida Philosophical Review.


9 See Kaplan, “Dthat,” for example.

10 Kaplan, “Dthat,” p. 293.


13 It should be noted that I am only committed to possible worlds in an ontologically innocent Kripkean manner, as the ways the world could have been.

14 Cf. Saul Kripke, Naming and Necessity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980). Kripke shows that there is a discrepancy between the cognitive value of a name and the cognitive value of any description or cluster of descriptions.

15 Such as Kant's negative commitment to the thing in itself.


18 This too is a little imprecise. What is grasped is a cluster of functions that are satisfied by objects in the world.


These terms were introduced by David Kaplan in “Demonstratives.”


This argument is analogous to one about shades of color that Evans advances (Cf. Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, p. 229).


I realize that I am here making a questionable assumption that a frigid wind is a particular. I have done so for the sake of continuity. The example can be crafted with any object, such as a book. So, while the particular individuating properties of a particular book may fade for an individual, they are still able to entertain thoughts of it.

I suspect a further reason sense is interpreted as such is due to the notion that sense determines reference just like individuating criteria determine reference.


Cf. McDowell, *Mind and World*.

Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, Chapter 1.

Frege “Über Sinn und Bedeutung,” p. 153, fn. B i.e.: (1) the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great, and (2) the teacher of Alexander the Great who was born in Stagira.

Kaplan, “Dthat,” p. 298.

Kaplan, “Dthat,” p. 298.

Kaplan, “Dthat,” p. 298.


Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, p. 15.

Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, p. 16.

David Kaplan, “Quantifying In,” *Synthese* 19 (1969): 178-214. Kaplan’s analogy here serves to explicate name of-ness, but it can be put to work just as well to explicate modes of presentation.

I realize this requires far more support than I give it here, I hope to dwell on this in a future paper.

At the very least, it is equally odd to claiming that one is acquainted with universals.


And as McDowell urges us to consider the conceptual as the realm of Fregean sense, this should be no surprise.
I do not wish for this to come off as saying that descriptions are not presented to the thinker in a particular way. The speaker does conceive the properties referred to within the description in a particular way, i.e., there are modes of presentation of properties.

There are two modes of tracking available, one is tracking through one mode of presentation, the latter is tracking through changing modes of presentation, I here am concerned only with the former.

And with this, Gareth Evans’ Generality Constraint on thought is met. See Evans, *Varieties of Reference*, p. 100.

See Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*. Kripke shows that there is a dislodge between the cognitive value of a name and the cognitive value of any description or cluster of descriptions.


**Bibliography**


