



## FREGEAN DE RE THOUGHTS

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**Abstract:** *This papers aims at clarifying some misunderstandings that seem to block an adequate account of de re thoughts within the Fregean framework. It is usually assumed that Fregean senses cannot be de re, or dependent upon objects. Contrary to this assumption, Gareth Evans and John McDowell have claimed that Fregean de re senses are not just possible, but in fact the most promising alternative for accounting for de re thoughts. The reasons blocking this alternative can be traced back to Russellian considerations that contaminated the interpretation of Frege. This contaminated understanding is first detected in Tyler Burge's distinction between de dicto and de re, then connected to the motivations behind David Kaplan's notion of character, and finally found in John Searle's descriptivist account. The difficulty in understanding de re thoughts is, roughly speaking, a side effect of the misunderstanding of the boundaries separating internal and external elements of thoughts, as well as the distinction between mental content and means of representation.*

**Keywords:** De re thought. Gottlob Frege. Gareth Evans. John McDowell.

### PENSAMENTOS DE RE FREGEANOS

**Resumo:** Nesse artigo, pretende-se esclarecer alguns equívocos que parecem impedir uma compreensão adequada de pensamentos de re no interior do quadro teórico fregeano. É normalmente pressuposto que os sentidos fregeanos não podem ser de re, ou dependentes de objetos. Contra essa pressuposição, Gareth Evans e John McDowell defenderam que sentidos de re fregeanos são não apenas possíveis, mas constituem de fato a alternativa mais promissora para compreender pensamentos de re. As razões que parecem bloquear essa alternativa remontam a considerações russellianas que contaminaram a interpretação de Frege. Essa compreensão contaminada é primeiramente detectada na distinção de Tyler Burge entre de dicto e de re, em seguida ela é conectada às motivações subjacentes à noção de caráter, de David Kaplan, e por fim ela é encontrada na abordagem descritivista de John Searle. A dificuldade de compreender pensamentos de re é, grosso modo, um efeito colateral da incompreensão das fronteiras que separam os elementos internos e externos do pensamento, bem como da distinção entre conteúdo mental e formas de representação.

**Palavras-Chave:** Pensamento de re. Gottlob Frege. Gareth Evans. John McDowell.

I

*De re* thoughts, or thoughts dependent upon objects, bring with them various semantic, epistemological, metaphysical, and psychological complications that can hardly be harmonized into a general theory of mind and language. But, at the same time, sound reasons seem to make their acceptance mandatory. It is, therefore, the theoretician's job to find a satisfactory account of them.

This is a modest paper. No novel complicated theory is advanced, nor do I attempt to solve any of the long-standing dilemmas called forth by the very notion of *de re* thoughts. Instead, this paper aims at clarifying some misunderstandings that seem to block an adequate understanding of this notion.

Why is it difficult to accommodate *de re* thoughts? Are these difficulties legitimate, or are they only side effects of some conceptual confusion? In order to bring these questions into consideration, I propose a preliminary inquiry into the path taken by the most influential interpretations of Gottlob Frege. These interpretations, or so I claim, were strongly influenced by some points raised by Bertrand Russell that guided the classical readings of Frege and the very understanding of central issues in philosophy of mind and language. Broadly speaking, the diagnosis offered here highlights a contamination of the understanding of mental phenomena with illegitimate epistemological issues. There is, in these contaminated understandings, an apparent contradiction between epistemological impositions and the Fregean view. This apparent conflict, in turn, motivated most of the difficulties concerning the proper understanding of *de re* thoughts.

According to a widespread interpretation of Frege, *de re* thoughts are problematic. A proposition, or a thought, can only refer to an object if a specific content can be provided by specifications that would count as the *sense* of that linguistic expression. Independently of the way in which such determinations or specifications are understood, the main point is that the content of a thought, or a proposition, must be capable of being expressed independently of the object's existence.

Contrary to orthodoxy, Evans (1982) claimed that this interpretation is, if not mistaken, at least extremely hasty. We can, he claims, account for singular terms, within the Fregean framework, in terms of *de re* senses. Following some remarks in the same spirit made by McDowell (1998a, 1998b, 1998c), this paper unfolds what seems to block the interpretation of Frege advocated by Gareth Evans and John McDowell. The apparent impossibility of this interpretation, I claim, is symptomatic of something deep that goes down to the roots of the difficulties in accommodating *de re* thoughts.

This paper is structured in the following way: I initially **(II)** present the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re*, as it is conceived by Burge (1977), and sketch a way of making it compatible with the Fregean framework; I then **(III)** highlight an ambiguity in Burge's view, following McDowell's (1998a) remarks; Subsequently **(IV)**, the central question is made more precise, as concerning the reasons that explain the misunderstandings of Frege; then **(V)** I investigate if Kaplan's (1979) notion of *character* can be seen as an analogue of *de re* senses, and conclude that it cannot; I later **(VI)** identify Burge's main reason for understanding *de re* thoughts in the way he does in the rejection of Searle's (1983) approach; I then **(VII)** argue that Searle falls prey to the same confusion and does not offer a

satisfactory Fregean alternative; I finally (VIII) conclude the paper with general conclusive remarks concerning the roots of the problem in Russell's epistemological commitments. If any illumination on the notion of *de re thoughts*, as it can be understood in Fregean terms, can be reached here, my aims are fulfilled.

## II

The inclusion of *de re* senses in the Fregean framework is apparently blocked by a certain conception of the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto*. This conception is well illustrated by Burge's (1977) account. According to Tyler Burge, if we focus on the logical form, or on the semantic level, we may say that a *de dicto* thought relates a subject to a full proposition, or to a completely expressed proposition, while a *de re* thought connects a subject to a *res*, which is something less than a full proposition. On the other hand, epistemologically speaking, we may say that a *de dicto* belief is fully conceptualized, while a *de re* belief situates the believer in a non-conceptual or contextual relation to the object of belief. According to Burge, if a propositional attitude is *de re*, a context involving the *res* itself must take part in the determination of this attitude.

Given the conception sketched above, the crucial question is what supposedly blocks the Fregean view from accepting *de re* thoughts. A handful of intriguing passages in Frege's corpus seem to clearly accept such possibility. I quote one of them:

If a time indication is conveyed by the present tense, one must know when the sentence was uttered in order to grasp the thought correctly. Therefore the time of utterance is part of the expression of the thought. [...]. In all such cases [expressions like 'yesterday', 'today', 'here' and 'there'] the mere wording, as it can be preserved in writing, is not the complete expression of the thought; the knowledge of certain conditions accompanying the utterance, which are used as means of expressing the thought, is needed for us to grasp the thought correctly. (FREGE, 1977, p. 10).

Frege refers here to thoughts that are not fully expressed by words, independently of any context. However, Frege does not mention thoughts that are not fully expressed *simpliciter*. We can conceive the set of fully expressed *de re* thoughts, which are, nonetheless, dependent upon objects. In other words, being *de re* does not mean being partially indeterminate. Nothing in Frege's thinking blocks the possibility of contexts contributing for the expression of fully expressed *de re* thoughts.

Many readers of Frege, however, see impossibility here. Consider the following example: someone who says 'yesterday' may express, through this expression, the same she does by saying 'today' in the next day. However, according to Frege, thoughts are composed of senses. What seems to be a single thought expressed in different ways could not, they claim, be a Fregean thought, but only a Russellian proposition, which can contain the object itself (the day referred in the example) as part of it.

Interpreting Frege so as to make his thought similar to Russellian propositions seems to be a sheer aberration. His thought would, in this way, become identical to Russell's, and Frege would have certainly noticed and stressed that. But it didn't

happen. As a matter of fact, Frege (1979, p. 187) is fairly explicit on that matter: "... we can't say that an object is part of a thought as a proper name is part of the corresponding sentence". Moreover, the distinction between sense and reference (*Bedeutung*) would become useless, since its main motivation is explaining the diverse cognitive values of co-referring expressions, and to do its job the distinction cannot admit the substitution of co-extensional terms *salva veritate*. Introducing objects in thoughts would deny any relevant role to senses (or modes of presentation), and it would turn mysterious the existing cognitive differences between co-referring expressions.

Such enigmatic paradoxes springing from Frege's view led Gareth Evans to search for alternative routes. Expressions like 'today' or 'yesterday', claimed Evans, keep track of the same object, allowing us to express the very same thought through different expressions. These terms act, according to Evans (1982), as *dynamic thoughts*. They are not like Russellian propositions, since not every co-referential expression does the same job. They have specific senses or modes of presentation, but senses that are dynamic. This should not be confused with a mere identification of sense and object. Senses keep playing their role of explaining cognitive differences. Understanding a dynamic expression means grasping the dynamic character of its mode of presentation. Ignoring its way of keeping track of the referent (*Bedeutung*) means losing any touch with the thought supposedly expressed.

### III

A fine-grained analysis of Burge's conception shows why he does not consider an interpretation of Frege along the lines proposed by Evans. There is an *epistemic contamination* in Burge's view that affects the semantic distinction between *de dicto* and *de re*. The notion of *concept* is regarded as the epistemic analogue of what is expressed in a meaningful expression. According to Burge (1977, p. 345), "traditionally speaking, concepts are a person's means of representing objects in thought". In this sense, perceptions or images can also be regarded as concepts, understood as means of representing objects. Semantically speaking, a belief is *de dicto* if it connects the believer to a *fully expressed proposition*. Epistemically speaking, one has a *de dicto* attitude if the belief is *fully conceptualized*. The content of a *de dicto* belief, according to Burge, is composed of semantic elements present in the believer's conceptual repertoire.

Since conceptual content is composed of means of representation in thought, a *fully conceptualized* belief is such that its propositional content must be exhausted by elements that are cognitively accessible to the believer's conceptual repertoire. According to this view, there is no place for the contribution of contextual elements. The attribution of fully expressed beliefs, or completely determined beliefs, does not admit *de re* elements.

According to McDowell (1998a, p. 218), Burge makes an illegitimate move when he shifts "[...] from concepts as parts or aspects of the *content* of a representational state, such as a belief, to concepts as *means* of representation". In the first sense, a concept is whatever is expressed through words; while in the second, concepts are what express, or they are the expressions or words themselves.

The ambiguity in the use of the notion of *concept* does not come without unwanted consequences. One of them is the untenable image of the relation between context and content. If properly understood, contextual elements do not have to be external to the capacities of determining content of a particular conceptual repertoire. Likewise, what is expressed by a statement that is responsive to the context does not have to be regarded as partially indeterminate, nor do we have to interpret Frege as saying anything along these lines.

McDowell summarized the point in the following way:

[...] a conceptual repertoire can include the ability to think of objects under modes of presentation whose functioning depends essentially on (say) the perceived presence of the objects. Such *de re* modes of presentation would be *parts* or *aspects* of content, not *vehicles* for it; no means of mental representation could determine the content in question by itself, without benefit of context, but that does not establish any good sense in which the content is not fully conceptualized. (MCDOWELL, 1998a, p. 219)

#### IV

The problem can now be made more precise. The main confusion concerns the distinction between *mental content* and *means of representation*. A conflation of that distinction, which is manifest in Burge's view, explains why most interpreters of Frege took the wrong track.

It is usually assumed that Fregean senses (which include senses of singular terms) must be expressible even in the absence of the determined object. Part of the explanation of this assumption is linked to the fact that Frege was read under Russellian lights. If we read Frege with the puzzle of empty proper names in mind, we tend to interpret his distinction of sense and reference (*Bedeutung*) as an analogue of Russell's theory of descriptions. However, this puzzle is not central to Frege, and it did not play any important role in motivating his distinction between sense and reference.

A great virtue of Burge's (1977) account is that it does not simply take the widely assumed conception for granted, but it tries to justify it. Burge brings to light the main premises supporting the standard interpretation, which can be summed up in two very plausible principles: (1) beliefs that are dependent upon objects can only exist if contextual elements play an essential role in determining thought; (2) context and content must be separated.

These principles were blindly assumed by former interpretations of Frege. Burge has the merit of making them explicit. When seen in clear light, the second premise supporting the standard view reveals an illegitimate distinction between context and content. The apparent impossibility of introducing *de re* elements in Fregean thoughts, I conclude, springs from that confusion.

The confusion pointed above is certainly not completely unmotivated. When investigated more closely, Fregean thoughts seem to shelter inconsistencies. It looks as if this notion is in need of urgent additions or improvements. What, after all, have led so many to misunderstandings? We walk here along a blurred line that separates mere verbal issues (how certain terms are used) from substantial philosophical questions. The exegetical aspect (what Frege had in mind) is, to my purposes here,

of secondary interest. The central question is why Frege was interpreted the way he was. Whatever blocked an interpretation along Evans' and McDowell's lines, it matters not for the sake of exegetical purity, but, above all, because it harbors a substantial philosophical problem concerning how *de re* elements can be understood.

## V

One of the reasons that can be advanced against the possibility of *de re* thoughts in Frege is the difficulty of accommodating an adequate notion of *constant linguistic meaning* for expressions that are responsive to context. One way of meeting this challenge is by attributing a constant mode of presentation to context sensitive expressions. According to this view, a single mode of presentation can have different uses. According to the standard view, this mode of presentation could not possibly be a Fregean sense, since it could not determine a referent (*Bedeutung*) without the help of context. This supposedly non-Fregean mode of presentation can be seen as a *character*, as it was conceived by Kaplan (1979), which is a function linking contexts to Russellian propositions or their parts.

There are some structural similarities between Kaplan and Burge. Kaplan's character maps the relation between content and context, but context and content are clearly separated, as Burge demands. In this sense, Kaplan seems to offer an alternative to the Fregean *de re* sense account, and an alternative that meets Burge's requirements. I investigate now if Kaplan's suggestion can be combined to our new understanding of Frege and if it counts as a satisfactory account of *de re* thoughts.

The first pressing question is if the Fregean framework is really in need of any substantive addition or transformation. The constant aspect of linguistic meaning, or so I argue, can be perfectly accommodated if one accepts Fregean *de re* senses. I sketch now a way of doing so, inspired mainly by McDowell's (1998c) proposal.

Particular *de re* senses, each one designating its own *res*, can be arranged in types. Different *de re* senses, or distinct modes of presentation, can present their *re* in the same way. Let us consider, for instance, modes of presentation dependent on some form of perceptual presence of the object. The constancy, or what is common to every use of the same context sensitive expression, is relative to a *type of de re* sense.

The distinction between the former strategy for accommodating the constancy of linguistic meaning (through the notion of *character*) and the latter (that differentiates types of *de re* senses) should not be obliterated. Roughly speaking, the first strategy goes as follows: given a particular context, the appropriate sub-sentential character determines an object, if it is cognitively graspable in the context; otherwise, it determines nothing. Even if there is no object, a character can still be expressed, since it is just a constituent of sub-propositional conceptual content. Now the second strategy: given a particular context, a *type of de re* sense can either determine a particular *de re* sense or not determine anything at all. In the case of not determining anything, there is emptiness, or absence (say), somewhere in the mind. In this empty slot, depending on the type of *de re* sense that is apparently instantiated, it is expected a specific *de re* sense, that in fact fails to be instantiated.

The first strategy stretches the notion of *de re thought* in direction of some kind of Russellian proposition, which would be composed of both *res* and character. The pair *res*-character would play the role of a *de re* sense (i.e., to determine a *Bedeutung*). This determination would depend upon the object (*res*) in order to succeed, and the appropriate *Bedeutung* would be the *res* itself. This suggestion may, *prima facie*, look adequate and even compatible with Frege. But here appearances are misleading. In fact, according to this view, thoughts become *de re*, but the Fregean doctrine that thoughts are made up of senses, and not of *Bedeutungen*, is violated. This strategy is a way of abandoning Frege and moving closer to a Russellian position that introduces worldly objects directly in the content of thoughts. In this sense, Kaplan and Burge share the view that an adequate understanding of *de re* thoughts asks for the abandonment of the Fregean view.

## VI

According to McDowell (1998c), Burge's illegitimate move (that of conflating vehicle and content of thoughts) finds support on the weaknesses of the only admitted alternative. According to Burge (1977), there seems to be only two alternatives: the abandonment of the Fregean view, that he advocates, or some version of the perspective adopted by John Searle (1983).

Burge (1977) claims that the only way in which Frege can deal with context sensitive singular terms is by attributing senses that determine their objects independently of the object's existence. This view, he claims, would be a kind of representational realism that defends that experience presents things "before the mind", whether or not the perceived objects actually exist. Even when an object is in fact perceived, one must say that it is "before the mind" only *by proxy*. The result is an indirect relation between demonstrative thought and object. Searle (1983, p. 218) explicitly defends this position. He claims that demonstrative thoughts, just like the ones that we have, could be thought even by a brain in a vat. According to Searle, causal relations determine the object of a perceptual demonstrative thought. The objects we think about are in the mind, it follows, only by proxy.

Searle's view is straightforwardly rejected by Burge (1977). This rejection explains the compulsory aspect that Burge sees in rejecting the Fregean view. However, the alternative presented by Burge faces equally difficult challenges. According to Burge (1977), the content of a belief is partially determined by something outside the believer's cognitive world, or by something external to the cognitive capacities of her mind. This strange consequence is tolerated because the rival position is considered to be even worse. The other alternative, namely Searle's view, would turn *de re* contents, which are determined both by elements from one's cognitive repertoire and by elements external to the thinker, into elements that are *in the mind*, as opposed to something that is *in the world*. Indeed, Searle's position is untenable, since it completely divorces the mind from the world. In this view, there is no genuine objective content, and whatever is called *de re* would be in fact strangely mental, and just mental.

Oscillations between unsatisfactory positions are very common in philosophy. Situations like that invite us to investigate shared suspect assumptions. Hence the insistence of McDowell in bringing a new interpretation of Frege to the stage. The point here goes much beyond mere exegetical justice. We may find here a hidden

alternative capable of solving long-debated puzzles. Re-interpreting Frege is then a truly philosophical strategy, aiming at solving specific problems. Introducing Fregean *de re* senses may be a way of satisfying all of Burge's own *desiderata* without the price of making pieces of our thoughts somehow external to our cognitive capacities. The main idea here, that of making *de re* senses possible, is that we can entertain thoughts that are both *de re* and that belong to the thinker's cognitive universe.

## VII

Searle (1983, p. 197) claims that the kind of relation between mind and particular objects that he defends is "Fregean in spirit". According to Searle, Fregean senses determine their corresponding referents (*Bedeutungen*) through a set of specifications that pick out the right object. In other words: a Fregean sense is an analogue of a Russellian definite description. According to Searle, by introducing the distinction between sense and reference (*Bedeutung*), Frege anticipated Russell's theory of descriptions. Following this interpretation, a sense is something that can be thought or expressed independently of the object's existence.

This "descriptivist" approach advocated by Searle was classically criticized by Kripke (1980). The notion of *rigid designation* pointed to the fact that a description, or a set of descriptions, understood as the material available in the mind, does not suffice to produce all specifications necessary for the exact determination of a particular object. Take the case of visual perception, understood here as a way of supplying resources for determining objects. How can a poor visual experience, in precarious conditions (insufficient light, distant or tiny objects), individuate particular objects? And how can we distinguish an object in our world from its replica in Twin Earth?

Searle (1983) claimed that Kripke (1980) barks at the wrong tree, since he fails to comprehend the mind's capacity of directing itself to particulars, which is anchored in relevant features of the particular experience itself. Such features can be seen as "this particular experience", or "the experience of that man". Given Searle's reply to Kripke, the relevant question becomes the following: "how is this to be made out to conform to the general 'Fregean' picture?" (MCDOWELL, 1998c, p. 263). According to Searle, the object that is immediately accessible to the mind is the experience itself, or the mind's attention towards something. 'This visual experience', seen as a particular thing, would be 'in the mind', and, therefore, it would be accessible to the specifications of the object. Searle's proposal, as stressed by McDowell (1998c), inherits the Russellian notion of *acquaintance*. The acquaintance relation turns possible the direct determination of objects of thought (or propositions) without the need of introducing the whole apparatus of the theory of descriptions. If Fregean particular senses work as definite descriptions, then, in the case of objects given by acquaintance, the Fregean notion of *sense* becomes simply useless. We need no specifications to pick out an object that is already immediately given to the mind.

McDowell (1998c) reveals that Searle shares the same deep misunderstanding or blindness that characterizes most interpretations of Frege. It is ignored that the *way* in which an object is presented to the mind matters to what a thought is. Sense and reference (*Bedeutung*) are dimensions of the meaningful character of something. Senses cannot be simply eliminated from meaningful



propositions, as well as their corresponding *Bedeutungen*. If one fails, both fail together. One can take “this visual experience of this man” as a mode of presentation of something. Having the right experience becomes then a necessary condition for presenting the right *Bedeutung*. In this case, perceptual modes of presentation depend upon the object’s existence. They are, consequently, *de re*, and, at the same time, they are also perfectly compatible with the Fregean framework. The particular term “this man” depends, in order to be thought, on a specific perceptual experience, otherwise it would fail to express or carry the right content to the thought. Any thought with elements of the same relevant kind is *de re*, and it is as Fregean as it can be. Regarding this element as a *de re* sense, however, does not oblige one to adopt any form of Russellian proposition with particular objects given by acquaintance. Such theories individuate contents by individuating objects, while the interpretation of Frege advocated here individuates *de re* modes of presentation.

As in Burge’s case, there are profound reasons that explain Searle’s blindness. Frege and Russell reacted to different problems, and most interpreters tended to read Frege as if he was answering Russell’s problems. This traditional misinterpretation situated the Fregean view among problems that are orthogonal to it. Different solutions to these problems can be perfectly accommodated within his framework. When Frege talked about singular senses, he intended to deal with the fine-grained character of mental contents. He seemed to have in mind the subtle cognitive distinctions related to such contents. Russell, on the other hand, in his theory of descriptions, aimed at making expressions meaningful even in the absence of the determined object. The two problems may seem intuitively connected, but they can be theoretically separated and treated differently.

What is needed is a theory capable of facing both challenges at once. It is granted here that both challenges are legitimate, but they are just distinct and not directly connected. Most difficulties in reaching an unproblematic understanding of *de re* thoughts is explained by the mixing of the two problems, or the understanding of one from the perspective of the other. In an important sense, Frege was indifferent to the problem of empty singular terms. And this indifference is, at the end, a virtue of his theory, since it can now be adapted to alternative solutions that fare better than Russell’s proposal.

Another way of understanding the blindness of Burge and Searle, or the very root of the problem being discussed here, is by focusing on the way in which an *intentional* treatment of mental content is confused with an *internalist* treatment. Searle’s conception of *internalism* is marked by the conviction that mental contents are “in the head”, or “in the mind”. Hence his claim that a brain in a vat can entertain the same thoughts that we can. This assumption clearly rules out the presence of *de re* elements in thought.

As a matter of fact, Searle begins with a legitimate insight, but its range is exaggerated. Since it is difficult to explain the individuation of objects in a purely descriptive way (as it was shown by Kripke’s remarks), Searle concludes that extra-intentional elements, which are relative to context or to the causation of mental states, are needed in order to identify the right object. An externalist account along these lines, according to Searle, changes the relevant subject, since talking about the directness of thought to particular objects is the same as talking about aspects of the content of certain mental states. Getting out of the mind (or adopting an externalist

point of view, or situating the content outside the subject's cognitive domain) is the same as talking about something else other than the contents of mental states. The boundary separating internal and external leads Searle, who looks for an account of intentional phenomena, to a confinement inside the internal. Otherwise, according to him, one would simply change the topic.

There is some true in the internalist insight of Searle. But his understanding of *internal* is, in an important sense, misleading. Being internal does not mean 'being in the head', but being part of the space of concepts, or being part of the repertoire from which thoughts are formed. Whatever is presented to the mind when an object is perceived, it does not have to be a messenger of the object to the mind. What our thoughts are about do not have to be *in the mind* in the sense of being *out of the world*. This spatial metaphor is deeply misleading. What conforms our thoughts does not have to be independent of the objects that we get in touch with. As pointed by McDowell (1998c, p.272), "one's subjectivity is partly constituted by one's point of view on the objects in one's environment". Accommodating *de re* thoughts does not mean eliminating our account from the intentional field. On the contrary, it means bringing the intentional back to its right place.

## VIII

I conclude this article highlighting the epistemological origin of the problems raised by Russell that influenced the standard interpretations of Frege.

Russell raised the following problem: it is unacceptable that we could be deceived by sentences that are apparently singular, but that in fact express no singular proposition, since there is no referred object, and, therefore, no proposition being expressed. This unacceptable situation led him to develop the theory of descriptions. Apparent singular sentences do not express singular propositions, but they are disguised definite descriptions, that can be expressed even in the absence of their objects. According to Russell, we can only express or entertain singular propositions when no delusion is possible concerning the existence of the referred object. Only sense-data, or objects immediately given to the mind by acquaintance, can be admitted as providing genuine singular terms.

Following McDowell, I then ask: why is such delusion so intolerable? Why can't we accept that some sentences express singular propositions, while others only seem to do it, but in fact fail to do so? The intolerable aspect of the delusion comes from deep epistemological assumptions. It is assumed that a procedure is epistemically legitimate, in a given situation, only in so far as it never leads to illusions or mistakes. In this sense, epistemology seeks for infallibility. A procedure can only produce acquaintance with an object if it can never fail to do so. The infallibility assumption, however, is not only unacceptable, but disastrous to epistemology as a whole. We would never be in a position to know anything if we cannot accept any possibly fallible procedure.

If infallibility is granted, Russell has no problem to accept *de re* elements. As a matter of fact, *re* can make part of Russellian propositions, which are composed of predicates and the objects themselves. But the need of infallibility springs from a misunderstanding of the Fregean distinction between sense and reference (*Bedeutung*). The Fregean idea that thoughts are constituted by senses guarantees the explicative role of thoughts (and their contents) in the psychological realm, since

it makes possible that different rational cognitive attitudes can be held towards co-extensional thoughts. Russell does not address this problem appropriately. And Frege, as opposed to Russell, can accommodate *de re* thoughts insofar as he rejects the infallibility requirement.

Why did Russell hold the infallibility principle? Among many reasons, Russell thought that abandoning it would lead to the paradoxical situation in which a subject could be mistaken about the contents of her own thoughts. It would be possible for a subject to believe that she entertains a particular thought when in fact there is nothing to be thought.

The deepest source of Russell's view, as pointed by McDowell (1998b, p. 236), is his holding of a Cartesian picture of the mind. According to this picture, mind is the internal space, where everything is transparent to the subject. If we admit singular propositions about external objects, the internal space loses its autonomy. Mind would become dependent on external conditions. This distinction between external and internal seems to motivate, still today, many positions concerning crucial philosophical issues. However, *internal* does not mean 'inside' the subject, but internal to the space of concepts. If we abandon the Cartesian picture, mind and world can finally be allowed to inhabit the same realm, and we will finally be allowed to connect thoughts to mundane objects without getting off our heads or changing the subject. The very understanding of *de re* thoughts depends on having a better understanding of the boundaries separating internal and external.

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