



## ARE *DE RE* BELIEFS CONTEXT-SENSITIVE?<sup>1</sup>

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I argue that the details of Stalnaker’s framework are inconsistent with his context-sensitive account of *de re* belief. I then explore how he could address this issue. I develop this argument in three sections. In §1, I define the main concepts of Stalnaker’s framework and present the notion of singular proposition central to his account of *de re* belief. In §2, I use a case study to cover the debate between Stalnaker and acquaintance theorists. In §3, I present the conceptual role that Stalnaker attaches to belief ascriptions in his paper “Belief Attribution and Context” and use my case study to show that he cannot respect this role unless he recognizes that some *de re* beliefs are constrained by acquaintance relations. Finally, in §4, I conclude by exploring how Stalnaker could avoid this objection without having to posit that *de re* beliefs are constrained by acquaintance relations.

Imagine I ask you the difference between these two sentences:

- (1) Griffin believes there are people currently being held in a Siberian prison.
- (2) Griffin believes Alice is being held in a Siberian prison.

Intuitively, the answer will be that (1) says that Griffin has a general belief that is not tied to a specific person, whereas (2) states that Griffin has a singular belief about a specific individual. Formally, we call this intuitive distinction between kinds of beliefs ‘the *de dicto* / *de re* distinction’ — where ‘*de dicto*’ beliefs are general beliefs that we hold about properties and ‘*de re*’ beliefs are singular beliefs that we have about particular objects. The debate about *de re* belief is a debate concerning the necessary and sufficient conditions that have to be met for Griffin to be considered as having a singular belief about Alice. A dominant tradition to this issue — hereafter ‘the acquaintance view’ — argues that a subject *S* has a *de re* belief about an object *o* only if there is an “acquaintance relation” between *S* and *o*. More succinctly, this means that Griffin does not have, and cannot be ascribed, a *de re* belief about Alice unless he is acquainted with her. This paper critically analyzes Stalnaker’s alternative to this tradition, which defends the claim that whether a belief is *de re* depends on the features of the context in which the belief is ascribed rather than

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an acquaintance relation between Griffin and Alice.<sup>3</sup> Though innovative, I argue that Stalnaker's account, in its current form, is inconsistent unless it finds a way to accommodate some elements of the acquaintance view.

## I. A PRIMER TO STALNAKER'S FRAMEWORK

'Proposition,' 'common ground,' and 'context set' refer to the three concepts of Stalnaker's framework that will be used throughout this paper. Formally, Stalnaker defines 'proposition' as a function from possible worlds (input) to truth-value (output) or equivalently as a set of possible worlds — *i.e.*, the set of possible worlds the function outputs as true.<sup>4</sup> A possible world is a way the world could be, and to say that 'a proposition is a set of possible worlds' simply means that it represents a set of possibilities or situations. The 'common ground' between two or more participants in a conversation is the set of propositions commonly assumed or believed to be true at a given time *t* by all participants.<sup>5</sup> The 'context set' refers to the set of possible worlds compatible with the set of propositions believed or assumed to be true in the common ground at *t*.<sup>6</sup>

As we will soon see, the notion of *de re* belief in Stalnaker's framework heavily relies on 'singular proposition,' which he defines as a proposition that eliminates possible worlds as a function of what one object is like in the context in which it is interpreted.<sup>7</sup> To illustrate what this means, imagine Griffin and Mary are having a conversation about their friend Alice. Assume the common ground between them at *t*<sub>1</sub> consists of some mundane propositions about Alice as well as the proposition that Alice left for Russia on January 1st. The context set relative to the common ground at *t*<sub>1</sub> is the set of possibilities compatible with Alice leaving for Russia on January 1st. Although it would be impractical to list all possibilities compatible with this proposition, some possible worlds in this context set would include *P*<sub>1</sub>: Alice arrived there as planned, met an Italian woman and moved with her to Rome, *P*<sub>2</sub>: Alice arrived there as planned, got arrested by the KGB, ended up in a Siberian prison, and so on. Having just learned that Alice is being held in a Siberian prison, Griffin wants to enrich the common ground between him and Mary by making this proposition common knowledge. In this context, Stalnaker argues that the proposition Griffin wants to add to the common ground can be represented by the following matrix:<sup>8</sup>

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3. Robert Stalnaker, *Context and Content: Essays on Intentionality in Speech and Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

4. Robert Stalnaker, "What is *De Re* Belief?," in *The Philosophy of David Kaplan*, ed. Joseph Almog and Paolo Leonardi (Oxford University Press, 2009), 233–246.

5. Stalnaker, "Assertion," in *Context and Content*, 84.

6. Stalnaker, "Assertion," 85.

7. Stalnaker, "What is *De Re* Belief?," 243.

8. There are two underlying assumptions here that Stalnaker makes which I will not dwell on. The first one is that the common ground between Griffin and Mary is rich enough for their use of 'Alice' to pick the same individual. The second assumption is that proper names are rigid designators — meaning that they pick out the same individual across possible worlds.

<i>i</i>	<i>j</i>
T	F

Intuitively, the idea is that Griffin is proposing to treat as True the possible worlds where there is a fact about Alice being in a Siberian prison — addressed here as the ‘*i*-worlds’ (worlds like  $P_2$ ) — and False the possible worlds where there is no such fact — the ‘*j*-worlds’ (worlds like  $P_1$ ). In this case, the claim is that the proposition is singular because it only eliminates as False possible worlds where Alice herself is not in a Siberian prison — *i.e.*, the proposition eliminates possible worlds as a function of what one object is like in the context.<sup>9</sup>

## II. AN OVERVIEW: ACQUAINTANCE THEORISTS VS STALNAKER ON *DE RE* BELIEFS

To understand Stalnaker’s account of *de re* belief and later elaborate on the issues it faces, consider the following case study:

*The Kidnapping*: Saul gets kidnapped by Bob and David and wakes up blindfolded in a place he does not recognize. Saul does not know who his kidnappers are, but by hearing David speaking and using the description ‘the kidnapper,’ he correctly concludes that there are two perpetrators: the person whose voice he has been hearing (David) and the satisfier of the description ‘the kidnapper.’ After an hour of secretly hovering over Saul to make sure he remained blindfolded, which he did, David goes to Saul and tells him that the kidnapper will be coming shortly. He correctly ascribes the following belief to Saul: ‘Saul believes (or knows) the kidnapper is coming.’ He then goes to the other end of the hangar and says to Bob: ‘You can come now and, just so you know, Saul believes (or knows) you are coming.’<sup>10</sup>

We can think of the debate about *de re* belief and their ascriptions as a debate concerning David’s belief report to Bob. The shared assumptions on both sides are that a *de re* belief is a belief whose content is a singular proposition, and that substitution by co-referring terms in belief reports is only allowed when the person’s belief is *de re*. With this in mind, is David permitted to substitute ‘the kidnapper’ by ‘you’ and report Saul’s belief to Bob as “Saul believes (or knows) you are coming”? On the acquaintance view, the story is simple. Given that there is no acquaintance relation between Saul and Bob, the proposition ‘the kidnapper is coming’ comes out as a general proposition about the property of being a kidnapper and substitution by a co-referring term like ‘you’ is not allowed in reporting Saul’s belief. The formal justification for their claim goes as follows. Acquaintance theorists argue that a proposition is singular only if there is an acquaintance relation between the

9. I am not covering the details of what it means to have a *de dicto* belief in Stalnaker’s framework as it would require going over technicalities that go beyond the scope of this paper.

10. Stalnaker’s own examples alternate between ‘belief’ and ‘know,’ so I will assume this is unproblematic and do the same.

believer and the object the proposition believed is about.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, we hold *de dicto* (general) beliefs when there is no such relation. While there are many different kinds of acquaintance relations, it is sufficient for us to focus on what acquaintance theorists call ‘epistemically rewarding relations.’ For the sake of this paper, ‘epistemically rewarding relation’ refers to a perceptual relation which enables the believer to acquire information about an object.<sup>12</sup> To illustrate this, imagine Saul were to take his blindfold off, see Bob at the other end of the hangar and tell himself: ‘*the kidnapper* has a blue shirt.’ In this case, his belief would be *de re* because he is in a position to acquire information about the satisfier of the description ‘the kidnapper’ — *i.e.*, to see that he has a blue shirt. On this view, it also follows that substitution by a co-referring term in belief reports may be allowed only if there is acquaintance. Intuitively, this is the case because in this situation the co-referring terms are words that could be used interchangeably by the believer herself to refer to the object.<sup>13</sup> For example, in the aforementioned scenario, Saul could easily tell himself ‘*he* has a blue shirt’ or ‘*the guy at the other end of the hangar* has a blue shirt’ rather than ‘*the kidnapper* has a blue shirt.’ In cases where there is no acquaintance relation, however, substitution is not allowed, since the believer’s belief is tied to the property of, for instance, being a kidnapper and not to a specific object that she can refer to with other terms. If we reconsider the kidnapping case study, the claim is simply that David was not allowed to substitute ‘the kidnapper’ with ‘you’ because Saul was not in an epistemically rewarding relation with Bob.

In contrast, Stalnaker argues that Saul has, and can unproblematically be ascribed, a *de re* belief about Bob. As mentioned in §1, Stalnaker does not define ‘singular proposition’ in terms of acquaintance relations, but rather in terms of how the proposition eliminates possible worlds in a context. In the case of *de re* beliefs and their ascriptions, the intuitive idea is that Saul will count as having a belief towards a singular proposition provided that the proposition he comes to believe eliminates possible worlds in the right way in the relevant context. Formally, Stalnaker’s position (henceforth ‘SP’) reads as follows:

(SP) A person *S* has and can be ascribed a *de re* belief about an object *o* if and only if, from the context in which the belief is ascribed, the update *S* makes when she comes to hold her belief eliminates possible worlds as a function of what *o* is like in them.<sup>14</sup>

11. François Recanati, “Singular Thought: In Defence of Acquaintance,” in *New Essays on Singular Thought*, ed. Robin Jeshion (Oxford University Press, 2010), 168.

12. Recanati, 152.

13. The formal explanation is that for Saul all these words have the same Fregean sense and, therefore, substitution does not result in a loss of cognitive significance for him.

14. This is a formal version of the view developed by Stalnaker in both *Context and Content* and his more recent paper in *The Philosophy of David Kaplan*. Informally, the view can be found in passages like the following: “We have no reason to be suspicious of singular propositions, and of the idea that a *de re* belief ascription is the ascription of a particular belief — a belief with a propositional content that is picked out as a function of an individual. [...] One can correctly and aptly ascribe a *de re* belief whenever one can give a correct and unambiguous characterization (in a given context) of the way the world is according to the believer by referring to a certain individual and saying that, in the world according to the believer, that individual is a certain way” (Stalnaker, “What is *De Re* Belief?,” 243).

As I understand it, the details of SP are worked out as follows.<sup>15</sup> According to Stalnaker, every conversation in which a belief attribution takes place involves a basic context and a derived context. The ‘basic context’ is the context set relative to the common ground between the participants of the conversation and the ‘derived context’ is the context set relative to what is known or presupposed to be the believer’s set of beliefs in the common ground. (Stalnaker 1999, 157) In my case study, let’s assume that the only things jointly known or presupposed to be in Saul’s set of beliefs by David and Bob is the proposition that he has been kidnapped along with other mundane propositions. The way to know whether Saul’s newly believed proposition that the kidnapper is coming is singular is as follows. Since David adds this proposition to what is known or presupposed to be Saul’s set of beliefs, this proposition will shrink the derived context by eliminating possible worlds in which there is no fact of the matter about the kidnapper coming. If David is able to correctly identify the eliminated possible worlds in the derived context as possible worlds in which Bob himself is not coming, then Stalnaker argues that Saul will count as having a *de re* belief about Bob. In this case, it would be tempting to say that the eliminated possible worlds are actually possible worlds in which the satisfier of the description ‘the kidnapper’ is not coming, and therefore conclude that Saul’s newly believed proposition does not meet the criteria to count as singular. However, given that Bob is known to be the satisfier of this description in the basic context, Stalnaker argues that the attributors can still “use their own resources” to characterize the eliminated possible worlds as possible worlds in which Bob is not coming — therefore leading to the conclusion to Saul has and can be ascribed a *de re* belief about Bob.<sup>16</sup> In order to really understand the details of Stalnaker’s position, it is useful to present a situation in which the content of Saul’s belief could not have been characterized as a singular proposition about Bob. For example, a problem would have arisen if Bob would have been a good friend of Saul and it was assumed in the common ground that Saul believed that Bob was not the kidnapper. In this case, David would not have been able to use his own resources to identify Bob as the satisfier of the description ‘the kidnapper’ in the eliminated possible worlds because it is already specified that Saul takes him to be someone else than the kidnapper in these possible worlds.

### III. OBJECTION TO SP

In this section, I argue that the problem with SP arises when we consider what is supposed to be the driving force of Stalnaker’s account of *de re* belief. In his paper *Belief Attribution and Context*, Stalnaker’s pragmatic contribution consists of recen-

15. I wish to emphasize the “as I understand it” because some of the details of Stalnaker’s explanation still remain obscure to me. Stalnaker was kind enough to reclarify his position in a correspondence I had with him earlier this year, and many of the points I mention here are extracted from his email rather than from “Belief Attribution and Context” or “What Is *De Re* Belief?.” The sure things are that he endorses SP and thinks that David can unproblematically ascribe a *de re* belief to Saul in the kidnapping case study. Any mistake in the reconstruction of his argument as to why this is the case is my fault.

16. He also emphasizes this point in the last section of “What is *De Re* Belief?” when he says: “The reference [...] is made by the attributors and is extrinsic in the sense that the attribution does not locate the referent in the mind of [...] [the believer]” (Stalnaker, “What is *De Re* Belief?,” 245).

tering the theoretical debate about the nature of *de re* beliefs and their attributions around the function(s) these things serve in our day-to-day conversations. Their conceptual role is, on his view, what I will henceforth call ‘the reduction role’:

*The Reduction Role:* The conceptual role of a spoken belief attribution is to allow participants in a conversation to informatively ascribe belief states to others so as to be able to distinguish between relevant possibilities and reduce their context set.<sup>17</sup>

This function stems from Stalnaker’s definition of ‘conversation’ as a rational activity involving agents that distinguish between possibilities.<sup>18</sup> On this account, to make an assertion is to put forward a set of possibilities and thereby eliminate the possibilities which are inconsistent with this proposed set of possibilities in our context set. If you are not convinced by Stalnaker’s definition of ‘conversation,’ recall Griffin and Mary’s conversation about their friend Alice. As Griffin adds to the common ground that Alice is in a Siberian prison, it is hard to deny that what they are doing is just distinguishing between possibilities and reducing their context set. On this view, each assertion we jointly accept and add to the common ground also brings us closer to finding the few sets of possible worlds which we aim to arrive at by the end of our discussion. In the case of Griffin and Mary, the aim is perhaps to know exactly where Alice is, and eliminating the possibilities incompatible with her being in a Siberian prison clearly brings them closer to their conversational aim. As a specific kind of assertion, Stalnaker argues that belief attributions allow participants in a conversation to ascribe belief states to others so as to then also allow them to reduce their context set and move forward with their conversation.<sup>19</sup> As I understand it, the idea is that by looking at how and when *de re* beliefs are ascribed, we will gain a better understanding of what *de re* beliefs are. SP is therefore meant as a theory that lays out this new and richer context-sensitive understanding of singular beliefs.

### III.A. ACQUAINTANCE RELATIONS AND THE REDUCTION ROLE

In what follows, I argue that if we accept Stalnaker’s pragmatic move and the idea that the conceptual role of beliefs attributions is to reduce the context set in a given conversation, we will have to recognize that acquaintance relations sometimes constrain *de re* beliefs. Formally, I use my case study to show that insofar as we endorse the reduction role, the conditions for singular belief laid out by SP are not sufficient conditions.<sup>20</sup> I first provide additional background on the kidnapping case study and present how the acquaintance theorist’s account of *de re* belief allows Bob to correctly reduce his context set and proceed with the kidnapping. Then, I present how Stalnaker’s context-dependent account of *de re* belief fails to satisfy the reduction role in this scenario.

17. “The function of a belief attribution [is] to describe correctly and informatively a belief state by distinguishing between relevant possibilities given by a context” (Stalnaker, *Context and Content*, 166).

18. Stalnaker, 2.

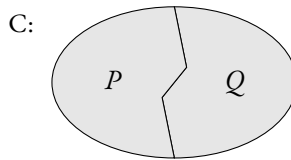
19. Stalnaker, 166.

20. There are cases where the conditions are met but where a *de re* belief cannot be ascribed.

Consider this additional information about the kidnapping case study:

*The Kidnapping* (continued): Let us suppose that it is common ground between Bob and David that two different sets of possibilities are available to Bob depending on how the kidnapping turns out. Torture method *X* will be used if Saul gets acquainted with him and torture method *Y* if he does not. The two possible scenarios are as follows. On the one hand, if David sees while secretly spying on Saul that he is able to take the blindfold off and get acquainted with Bob, who stands at the other end of the hangar, David will act as if nothing happened, go tell Saul that the kidnapper is coming and then come to Bob to update the situation. If, on the other hand, he sees that Saul never takes his blindfold off, he also goes to Saul and tells him that the kidnapper is coming, but this time comes to Bob with a different update.<sup>21</sup>

Intuitively, we know that the context set of Bob before David comes to him looks like the following Venn diagram:



That is, Bob has two subsets of possibilities that he knows he might act on. ‘*P*’ is the subset of possible worlds in which he uses the torture method *X* and where Saul is acquainted with him. ‘*Q*’ is the subset of possibilities in which he uses the torture method *Y* and where Saul is not acquainted with him. He awaits David’s report to know how to proceed.

On the acquaintance theorist’s account of *de re* belief, I argue that belief attributions could be used effectively in the conversation between Bob and David to allow Bob to correctly reduce his context set and proceed with the kidnapping. If we recall, acquaintance theorists argue that Saul has and can be ascribed a *de re* belief only if he was in an epistemically rewarding relation with Bob. According to their view, it also follows that substitution by a co-referring term is allowed only if there was acquaintance. Now, assume that in this case Bob intuitively knows that substitution by a co-referring term like ‘you’ in David’s belief report means that Saul has a *de re* belief about him and no substitution means that his belief is merely *de dicto*.<sup>22</sup> In the first scenario, then, where Saul takes off his blindfold and gets

21. This additional constraint on the case study is not ad hoc. Perhaps Bob is concerned with Saul going to the police, and Saul knowing his identity will clearly affect the kind of torture method he will use.

22. The assumption that no-substitution entails *de dicto* is dubious. However, I don’t think my objection relies on it to work. The important thing is that it is possible on the acquaintance theorist’s account of singular belief to correctly proceed.

acquainted with him, David proceeds with the plan, warns Saul that the kidnapper is coming and then goes to Bob to tell (3):

- (3) You can come now and, just so you know, Saul knows/believes you are coming.

Since substitution by the co-referring term ‘*you*’ occurs in (1), Bob correctly infers that Saul has been in an epistemically rewarding relation with him and eliminates *Q* of his context set to then proceed with torture method *X*. In the second scenario, where he does not take his blindfold off, David proceeds with the same plan but this time tells Bob (4):

- (4) You can come now and, just so you know, Saul knows/believes the kidnapper is coming.

Since no substitution occurred in (4), Bob correctly infers that Saul is not acquainted with him and proceeds to eliminate *P* of his context set and goes with torture method *Y*. From this example, it seems like the acquaintance theorist’s account allows for belief attributions to respect the reduction role.

Given SP, I argue that a belief ascription on Stalnaker’s account of *de re* belief will not be enough to reduce the context set of Bob in the revised version of the kidnapping case study. If we recall from §2, whether or not Saul gets himself into an epistemically rewarding situation where he can acquire information about Bob is irrelevant to *de re* beliefs and their ascriptions. When reporting a Stalnakerian *de re* belief, what matters is whether, from the context in which the belief attribution is made, the content of Saul’s belief is a singular proposition that eliminates possible worlds as a function of what Bob is like in them. Since this is the case, what this means is that in both situation 1 and 2 — that is, regardless of whether he took the blindfold off — David is allowed to substitute the definite description ‘the kidnapper’ by a co-referring term and report Saul’s belief with (5):

- (5) You can come now and, just so you know, Saul knows/believes *you* are coming.

Since (5) clearly does not allow Bob to properly distinguish between the relevant possibilities in his context set, another assertion along the lines of ‘Saul remained blindfolded’ or ‘Saul saw you’ would have to be added for him to correctly proceed. However, I argue that to add this proposition is to deny the conceptual role of belief ascriptions that Stalnaker himself posits they have.

#### IV. CAN STALNAKER — OR ANY OTHER CONTEXT-SENSITIVE ACCOUNT OF *DE RE* BELIEF — AVOID THIS OBJECTION?

Insofar as this paper is concerned, *the kidnapping* raises an issue for Stalnaker’s context-sensitive account of *de re* belief because it shows that, on Stalnaker’s own terms, the conditions for singular beliefs laid out by SP are not sufficient conditions. More generally, if we look at the case study outside of Stalnaker’s framework, *the*



*kidnapping* arguably also raises a problem for anyone who wishes to argue for a context-sensitive account of singular belief. Any theorist who wants to define ‘*de re* belief’ without positing that acquaintance relations have a role to play will easily be able to explain why David can ascribe to Saul a belief about Bob in the first version where no torture method is involved. But as I have shown, it seems like many contexts can be modified so as to make singular beliefs and their attributions constrained by acquaintance relations, and it is unclear how these theorists will be able to account for such cases. Though it is outside the scope of this paper to investigate how other context-sensitive accounts of singular belief can accommodate my case study, I want to explore at least two options that Stalnaker could pursue to avoid my argument, and then present why one should be preferred over the other. The two options that immediately come to mind are the following:

- (A) He can abandon the reduction role and accept that some spoken *de re* belief attributions are ambiguous.
- (B) He can find an additional context-sensitive constraint that accommodates *the kidnapping*.

At first sight, option A appears to be the simplest solution. After all, why should we even posit that spoken belief attributions always have to respect the reduction role? Couldn’t this be an exception? Though this is a reasonable intuition, I argue that the issue with A is that it requires questioning a fundamental assumption that need not be challenged. In order to make the claim that a sentence like ‘Saul knows you are coming’ is ambiguous, we have to claim that it can be associated with two different updates. The first one is when ‘you’ works as a rigid designator and the proposition eliminates possible worlds as a function of what Bob is like in them — a ‘rigid designator’ is a term that refers to the same object across possible worlds. The second update is when ‘you’ works like a kind of disguised description and the proposition eliminates possible worlds as a function of how the satisfier of the description ‘the kidnapper’ is like in the possible worlds. In my opinion, the issue with this solution is that we would have to argue that even when the common ground is rich enough for speaker’s use of an indexical to refer to the same individual, there are still cases where the proposition does not eliminate possible worlds as a function of what this individual is like in them. It seems unclear to me how one could explain this phenomenon in Stalnaker’s framework. However, if one could explain how Stalnaker’s framework can explain this phenomenon, then this would avoid the objection.

Option B consists of modifying Stalnaker’s original account of singular belief so that it can accommodate *the kidnapping*. Though the details would need to be developed, I maintain that this is the most attractive solution. A possible entry point to rethink Stalnaker’s theory is by questioning his definition of ‘singular proposition.’ One of the problems that arises in the revised version of the case study is that the context seems to be structured by a new question under discussion — *i.e.*, one concerning whether Saul got acquainted with Bob or not.<sup>23</sup> When

23. A brief discussion of how *de re* beliefs and singular thoughts are dependent on the question under

such a question is considered, our intuitions yield that a *de re* belief ascription is not appropriate even though David was able to identify the possible worlds eliminated by the newly believed proposition as possible worlds in which Bob himself is not coming. Insofar as to have a *de re* belief is to have a belief towards a singular proposition, this means that Stalnaker's current definition of 'singular proposition' falls short of grasping what singular propositions actually are.<sup>24</sup> If there is a way to theorize how the questions under discussion at the context have a role to play in our definition of 'singular proposition,' and this new theory aligns with our intuitions that a *de re* belief attribution is in order only in contexts like the first version of *the kidnapping*, then this will be a new start for the Stalnakerian theory of *de re* belief. At this point, I leave it to the proponents of Stalnaker's framework to determine how the details of the question-sensitivity of context are to be worked out, and thereby also leave it to them to determine whether option B can be fully developed.

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discussions at a context is offered by Jeffrey King in "Singular Thought, Russellianism, and Mental Files."

24. Stalnaker's account may still be seen as presenting the necessary conditions for a proposition to be singular.