What Do You Have In Mind?¹

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Consider the difference between reaching over to the desk to grab your copy of Kant’s first *Critique* and reaching over to grab some book or other. This is the difference between an action directed on a specific thing and an action directed on something, but no one thing in particular. In the first case, you will be successful only if you grab your copy of Kant—only one book will do; in the second, you will be successful if you grab a book, and here any book will do. This is a difference that is frequently displayed: many intentional actions are directed on things, and of these, a good many are directed on *specific* things. In speech, we mark this difference by saying that you *have a particular thing in mind* in the first case but not in the second.

This establishes that we can get at the notion of *having a particular thing in mind* (IM) with the help of intentional action, but a full-blown analysis of IM should be grounded in an assessment of its role in all contexts where it applies. That there should be additional contexts beyond intentional action seems apparent from the language we use in applying IM and the range of cases in which we apply it. Attention to language reveals that we often talk about having things “in mind” without mentioning actions, such as when we say that we had a friend in mind just last week; we might even say that we had something in mind while *denying* that we acted, such as when we say that we had the friend’s birthday in mind but didn’t buy a card. Turning to the range of cases, note that we are willing to describe people as having some particular thing in mind when they are not acting, such as when we say that a student had a party in mind when they should have been concentrating on a lecture. These examples suggest that IM is applicable beyond the context of intentional action.

In this essay, I supply an account of what it is to have a particular thing in mind. I begin by arguing that, despite appearances, IM applies only within the context of intentional action. Any evidence that suggests otherwise depends on an incomplete appreciation of the role played by intentional action in examples such as those considered above. During the course of this argument, I consider and reject an alternative in which IM is analyzed in terms of *de re* belief. In the second part of the essay, I develop an analysis of IM that acknowledges its essential connection with intentional action. I conclude by arguing that this analysis applies to those cases
where we are intuitively inclined to say that an agent acts with a particular thing in mind.

I. Of De Re Belief And The Need For Action

The metaphor of the mind as container is a commonplace. We often talk about keeping things in mind, and we describe things as being in the “back” or the “front” of our minds. Metaphorical application of spatial language to thought is natural and reasonable, given the structured character of thought and the analogy between movement through this structure with our “mind’s eye” and movement through physical space. Application of the specific metaphor of having a particular thing in mind implies an intimate epistemic relationship between a thinker and the object of thought. It can imply knowledge of a particular thing, such as when one is said to have a friend in mind, or control, such as when one is said to have a particular goal in mind, or merely directed attention. The question I seek to answer in this essay is this: what is it about the mind that supports application of this metaphor?

A natural response involves the mind’s ability to represent the world as being thus-and-so, coupled with an agent’s ability to adopt an attitude toward the world so represented. According to this response, there is a certain type of mental representation such that if an agent has an attitude with content that includes some thing \( x \) represented in this way, then that agent can be said to have \( x \) in mind. The attitude in question is typically taken to be belief, and it is in discussions of de re belief that this response has received its most complete development.\(^1\) In this section, I consider this response as it has been developed in terms of de re belief and argue that it is neither sufficient nor necessary for having a particular thing in mind. Development of his response, by itself, will not work as the final analysis.

1.1 The Nature of De Re Belief

A de re belief is a belief about a certain object to the effect that it has a particular property. This sort of belief concerns a particular object, and as such contrasts with de dicto belief. A de dicto belief is a belief that a certain proposition is true. Such a proposition may well depend for its truth on the way things stand with some object or other, but de dicto belief in it
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does not concern any particular object. For instance, say that you believe that the car driven by Jay, a friend of yours, is an Acura. This would be a de re belief if it were based on familiarity with the car itself. It would be a de dicto belief if it were based not on familiarity with the car but on your awareness that Jay is an Acura mechanic and only drives the type of car he works on. The difference between these beliefs can be represented at the level of the surface grammar of belief reports as follows:

(a) De re: The car Jay drives is believed by S to be an Acura.
(b) De dicto: S believes that the car Jay drives is an Acura.

Investigation into the relation between these types of belief began in earnest with Quine (1956). Accounts of this relation are generally built around one of two theses: de re belief reduces in some fashion to de dicto belief, or de re belief is sui generis and does not reduce. Researchers who have developed these accounts cluster into two methodological camps: those who inquire into the logical nature of belief reports, paying attention to scope issues, opaque contexts, and other aspects of intensionality, and those who inquire into the character of and differences between the mental states and contents that constitute each type of belief. Since our concern is with the mental underpinnings of IM, we will focus on the latter camp.

For those who concentrate on the character of mental states and contents, differences of opinion about the relation turn on the role played by belief content in mediating the relationship between agent and object. Those who argue that de re belief is reducible maintain that the content of such a belief includes a representation of a certain type that denotes the item had in mind. Specification of the type in question varies from account to account—Kaplan (1968), for instance, argues that it must be rich enough in detail to put one “en rapport” with the item, while Sosa and Pastin (1981) argue that the representation must locate and motivate the agent. These views of de re belief form what we will call the Satisfactual Approach, and they are bound together by two conditions:

(i-S) In both the de dicto and de re cases, the believer is related denotationally to the object of belief by way of a representation that figures into the content of the
belief, and

(ii-S) The representation in the *de re* case puts one in intimate epistemic contact with the object of belief, enabling the believer to individuate and identify that item in particular, whereas representations that fail to do this figure into the *de dicto* case.

The Satisfactional Approach differs markedly from that taken by those who regard *de re* belief as sui generis. Those who hold this view take what we will call the *Relational* Approach, and they maintain that the believer stands in a different relation to the object of belief in the *de re* case than in the *de dicto* case. The denotation relation is found in the *de dicto* case, they would allow, but in the *de re* case the believer stands in a causal/historical relation with the object of belief. Disagreement about the mediating role of belief content divides proponents of the Relational Approach. A first group insists that the content of the belief includes a mode of presentation that associates the agent with a particular object, either because the mode of presentation functions as a mental indexical that picks the object out causally in a particular context (e.g., Burge (1977), Rudder Baker (1982), Bach (1987)) or because it is specific to and dependent on that particular object and through this influences “which configurations a mind can get itself into”¹ (e.g., Evans (1982), McDowell (1984) and (1986)). A second group argues that there must be a causal/historical connection between belief state and object in order for there to be a thought at all. Some members of this group who are also members of the first see this as a second requirement to be added to that involving modes of presentation in distinguishing *de re* beliefs (e.g., Evans (1982), McDowell (1984) and (1986)); others, however, believe that this is the lone requirement and that the representational content of beliefs is irrelevant.¹ In general, though, one condition distinguishes *de re* from *de dicto* beliefs for those who embrace the Relational Approach:

(i-R) *De re* beliefs relate believer to object of belief in a causal/historical fashion, whereas *de dicto* beliefs do not.

1.2 On the Insufficiency of De Re Belief as an Analysis of IM

Satisfactional and Relational Approaches yield substantially different accounts of *de re*
belief. Even so, both yield accounts of a type of belief that stands in an intimate relation to particular things, and this is what recommends them as theoretical foundations for an analysis of IM. To be sure, the differences between these approaches do have an impact on the details of the analyses they support, but they are not relevant to the general contours. Analyses of IM that are grounded in *de re* belief all include the following condition: a person has an item in mind only if they have a *de re* belief about that item. Some also regard this as a sufficient condition for having a particular thing in mind (e.g., Kaplan (1968)). According to these accounts, IM resolves into a cognitively mediated belief relation with an object. Analysis of the notion solely in terms of *de re* belief is inadequate, however; at the very least, we must require that the *de re* belief figure into occurrent thought. We can make the need for occurrent thought plain with a couple of considerations. First, consider that we use IM to describe events that involve thinking agents; in particular, it is used to get at an aspect of that thinking that involves an object in particular. Thus, IM would appear to be at home in the context of occurrent thought. Second, we are typically connected via perception to many things at any one time, and via descriptive conditions to many more, yet we are not willing to say that we have all of those things in mind at that time. Rather, we have in mind only those objects that are related to *activated* states, that is, states that are an active part of our mental life at that time. Thus, if a *de re* belief is to support an agent in having a particular thing in mind, it must figure into activated cognitive states—by itself, it would be too permissive, inclining us to say that an agent has things in mind which are unrelated to the agent’s current thoughts.

Adding cognitive activity, we get a second account of IM grounded in *de re* belief according to which an agent would have a particular thing in mind if and only if they had a *de re* belief about that item that figured into the content of their occurrent thoughts. This type of account is recoverable from views of *de re* belief that have been defended by Pollock (1980) and Lycan (1986). This account is also inadequate, however—while cognitive activity is necessary, it is not sufficient. If a *de re* belief supports having a particular thing in mind, it does so not only in the context of cognitive activity but also in the context of intentional action. To be sure,
there are cases where an agent has some particular thing in mind in which there would appear to be little room for intentionality. Consider this example:

1. A friend pops into your head while you are driving and then pops out again as soon as you see the highway patrolman.

Here we have cognitive activity without overt behavior. However, note that you do attend to your friend—that is, you entertain the mental representation of your friend and through it focus on her before you are forced to think of other things. If your friend were to pop in and out of your head without you noticing and attending to her—if this is even possible—it would not be correct to say that you had your friend in mind. Thus, active focus and attention are required by relation \( M \), and these are certainly intentional mental acts.\(^1\)

But what if the activated states exerted causal influence while remaining beyond the reach of conscious attention? States of this sort are found in the following case:

2. You get the nagging feeling that you left something at home that you need. You return home and start randomly searching the house. After watching you with amusement, your housemate holds up your briefcase and asks if it is what you seek. It is.

This example differs from the first in that there is no cognitive state to entertain, no image or propositional content to be the subject of your attention. Of course, there is intentional action, viz., the act of searching for something you’ve misplaced. However, perhaps we could find a case of having an object in mind that is similar to (2) but does not involve overt action; if so, we would have a case in which an agent can be said to have a particular thing in mind without there being intentional action of any sort. However, I believe that this is not possible. Consider that if there were such a case, the agent involved would deny that he has anything in mind; after all, he has no access to the activated states and has no reason to suspect that they are there because they are, \textit{ex hypothesi}, exerting no influence on either his conscious mental or physical life.\(^1\) Further, there would be no evidence available to an outside observer that the agent has an object in mind.

If the activated states did exert such an influence, thereby supplying the agent and observer with
evidence that the agent has a particular thing in mind, they would be the object of active focus and attention (at least) and so would support intentional action. In addition, it is worth noting that if we allow such a case, then we must say that we have many things in mind at all times, given the level of object-related cognitive activity that goes on beneath the level of conscious awareness. These considerations support the conclusion that an agent can only have a particular thing in mind in the context of intentional action.

1.3 On the Non-necessity of De Re Belief in the Analysis of IM

Thus, de re belief alone, or even supplemented by cognitive activity, is incapable of supporting an analysis of IM. But although it is insufficient, one might argue that if developed in the context of intentional action, an account in terms of de re belief would support an analysis of IM. In fact, some of those who have developed accounts of IM in terms of de re belief have recognized the essential connection between IM and intentional action. Devitt (1981), for instance, develops his account of having something in mind in the context of using singular terms to refer. Sosa and Pastin (1981) argue that one has a particular object in mind only if the agent is in possession of a property that both locates the object and motivates the agent to act on it. However, continued commitment to de re belief undermines these approaches, as de re belief proves too restrictive a representational medium to support an adequate analysis of IM. In what remains of this section, I argue that de re belief, whether understood relationally or satisfactionally, is not necessary to an account of IM.

The representational properties that relate a belief to a particular object determine how de re belief is used to analyze IM in the context of intentional action, and so at this point, the differences between relational and satisfactional approaches to de re belief become relevant. On the relational side, we find Devitt (1981), who argues that a person has “an object ... in mind if and only if there is a certain sort of causal connection between his state of mind and the object.”\footnote{Echoes of this view can be heard in the work of Lycan (1986) and of Bach (1987), both of whom argue that de re belief must be grounded in a “real relationship” that is causal in character and not merely descriptive.} According to proponents of the Relational Approach, an agent has a
*de re* belief of an object just in that circumstance where there is a causal relation between the agent and the object that is mediated by the agent’s “state of mind”, or in short, *de re* belief requires a causal relation between agent and object. Proponents of the Satisfictional Approach disagree, however, arguing that *de re* belief is merely a type of *de dicto* belief, and that the relation between agent and object is denotational. Sosa and Pastin (1981), for instance, develop an account of what it is to have a particular thing in mind when acting that sits comfortably within the scope of *de dicto* psychological attitudes, requiring no causal supplementation. Kronfeld (1990), in defending what he calls the “Descriptive Research Program,” argues that “individuating representation is both necessary and sufficient for a belief to be *de re*,” where ‘individuating representation’ is to be understood descriptively. As we saw in (ii-S) above, *de re* representations are distinguished from *de dicto* representations on this approach because their content individuates a thing in a way that enables the believer to identify and, possibly, act on that thing.

We can have many things in mind—concrete things, such as dogs, friends, and cars, as well as abstract things like facts, numbers, and fictional characters. Concrete things can enter into causal transactions with believers, but abstract objects such as numbers and fictional characters cannot. We are related to them only by description, and so cannot have *de re* beliefs about them if we restrict ourselves to a relationalist account of *de re* beliefs. Thus, a causal connection between agent and object is not required in general if the agent is to have that object in mind, and so *de re* belief understood relationally is not a necessary part of all instances of IM.

While the Satisfictional Approach would appear to have no difficulty accommodating facts, numbers, and fictional characters, it is closed off from other things that one can have in mind. The cases which support this come in two sorts: those where the occurrent thoughts that support an agent in having a particular thing in mind have no descriptive content, and those where there is no descriptive content available at all. As an instance of the first sort, consider shooting a gun at arcade ducks: you point the gun at the place where the ducks emerge, waiting for one to show its beak; as one does you lock onto it and squeeze the trigger. In this case, you
perceive the duck and have it in mind while shooting, but you do not conceive of it as ‘the one and only F thing’, i.e., you do not conceive of it descriptively. There is a causal connection that supports the thoughts which figure into the episode, but these thoughts do not have descriptive content.\footnote{A second instance of this sort is supplied by (2) above: in that case, you have your briefcase in mind even though you are unable to think of it under any description that might help your search. In both of these examples, the occurrent thoughts that account for the fact that you have a particular thing in mind do not contain \textit{de re} beliefs of the type that are sanctioned by the Satisfacational Approach. However, it is true that in both there are descriptive conditions available to you that you could use to think of the objects in question. It is here that the second sort of case becomes important, for in instances of this, there are no such conditions available. As an example of the second sort of case, consider looking at a book on a table, turning away, and looking back at what you take to be the same book in the same place on the table; however, unbeknownst to you, a student replaced the first book with a second while you were looking away. Here we can have the second object in mind while we are looking at it even though the internal (narrow) content of the thoughts does not make available descriptive content that enables us to individuate this item.\footnote{Thus, \textit{de re} belief understood satisfactorially is not in general necessary for having a particular thing in mind, and so we cannot rely solely on the Satisfacational Approach in developing our analysis.} Thus, \textit{de re} belief understood satisfactorially is not in general necessary for having a particular thing in mind, and so we cannot rely solely on the Satisfacational Approach in developing our analysis.

Thus, an analysis of IM in terms of \textit{de re} belief alone cannot work. \textit{De re} belief is not sufficient by itself, for it is not essentially connected with intentional action, whereas IM does. Nor is any one account of \textit{de re} belief necessary: the account that we develop in the context of intentional action will accommodate cases of IM that cannot be explained by the Relational Approach and other cases that cannot be explained by the Satisfacational Approach. Thus, we must move in a different direction, although as we will see, it will behoove us to take along some aspects of \textit{de re} belief for later use.
II. Aiming at an Analysis

The argument of the previous section establishes that we can’t adequately develop the metaphor of the mind as a container through analysis of the container alone. Attention to the representational content of thoughts about the world or the mental states to which we ascribe this content will not yield an adequate analysis of IM; we must also attend to what the mind does, and more specifically, how it works in the context of intentional action. My goal in what remains of this essay is to supply an adequate analysis. At this point, we would do well to note that IM is a firmly entrenched part of folk psychology: we use it regularly, and we have a pretty clear sense of when it is correctly applied and when it isn’t. Even so, it is not obvious where we should begin our analysis, a fact that is brought into high relief by the wide variety of different ways in which IM can be used. First, the type of thing that an agent can have in mind can vary widely, ranging from the concrete to the abstract and from individuals to collections. Second, agents can be connected to these objects in a variety of ways, e.g., perceptually, descriptively, or perhaps merely through a recognitional ability. In light of this variety, it might be best to find a relatively simple, straightforward case and examine it with a view to identifying some salient aspects of IM. With these in hand, we can piece together a preliminary framework for our investigation. It is crucial that we regard this framework as preliminary: it is unlikely that our simple case will reveal all the salient aspects of what it is to have a particular thing in mind and the ones it does reveal will almost certainly have a more complex form in the final account.

In identifying a simple case, we must remember the essential connection between IM and intentional action. Since we typically ask the question, “What do you have in mind?”, so as to determine the item that is essential to the agent’s action, i.e., the item on which the success of that action depends, our case will involve an item in that role. It will help simplify matters for the time being if we take the item to be a concrete individual, setting aside all the nettlesome metaphysical complexities that arise when we consider abstract, general, or collective relata. Finally, we will take the agent to be related perceptually to the item, as this is perhaps the most direct and perspicuous relation between agent and object. With all of this in place, we turn to our
case: the aiming of a gun at a target. Aiming is a transparent example of acting with a particular thing in mind, and in this case it involves a concrete object to which an agent is related perceptually and on which an action of the agent depends.

When an agent aims at something—say, a gun at one of the arcade ducks—her attention is focused on a specific thing. She sees the duck, and this perception together with her focused attention enables her to remain perceptually locked onto it. Perceptual contact of this sort is typically necessary for aiming, but it is not sufficient: to be aiming at the duck, this visual contact must guide her in performing the further action of tracking the duck as it moves with the muzzle of her gun. She intends to shoot the duck, and to succeed, she must be guided by her perception of it. Her perceptual fix guides her in pointing the gun, giving her a certain measure of control over the outcome of her action. She fires, and if her aim is true (i.e., if her perception served as a good guide for her action) and the world cooperates, she hits the duck.

This example reveals two central aspects of what it is to have a thing in mind: the structural aspect and the functional aspect. The structural aspect concerns the connection between the agent and the duck. In this case, they are causally linked via perception. It is by virtue of this connection that the agent is able to fix her attention on the duck and gather information about its location, movement, etc. I call this the “structural” aspect because the connections in virtue of which the agent is able to have the duck in mind constitute a causal structure that consists of the agent, the duck, and a cognitively mediated causal link. As evinced by our case, the functional aspect concerns the causal roles played by the agent-object structure as the agent attempts to accomplish a practical goal. The agent has a goal—viz., to hit the duck—and to accomplish it she must act in a particular way: she must adjust where she points the gun, how quickly she shoots, etc., based on what she perceives. That is, she must make informed decisions and execute plans that have an influence on her overt physical behavior. This suggests that the functional aspect is realized at two different levels in the aiming case: the cognitive level and the physical level. Cognitive functionality concerns the roles that the structural connections play in the mental life of the agent, especially in information gathering, planning and decision-
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making. Physical functionality concerns the influence exerted by the structural connections on the overt behavior of the agent as evinced in physical movements, such as tracking behavior. In our case, the physical functionality of the structural connections are in part a function of their cognitive functionality: they influence physical behavior in ways that are guided and constrained by the plans and decisions that constitute the connections’ cognitive functionality. Finally, both of these levels involve intentional actions, and the duck figures into the success conditions of these as an essential part. Successful planning and decision-making in this case requires involvement of the duck and its location, successful aiming requires that our agent track the duck, and successful target shooting requires that she hit it. Thus, the object that figures into the structural aspect of IM is an essential part of the causal roles that constitute its functional aspect. Call this the essentiality dimension of the functional aspect.

Therefore, in this example the agent is acting with a particular object in mind, i.e., she aims at the duck, because she (1) perceives the duck, (2) points her gun at it, and (3) uses the perception in (1) to guide her in making decisions that lead to the action described in (2). The first of these involves structural connectivity, the second physical functionality, and the third cognitive functionality. Note also that specification of (2) requires mention of the duck, and that (3) ensures that the same item will be essential to both (2) and (3). In this way, these conditions also capture the essentiality dimension of the functional aspect.

III. An Analysis of Relation $M$

In this section, I offer an analysis of what it is to have a particular thing in mind that takes the aiming case as its starting point but extends beyond it in a number of important respects. We surely want to say that the target shooter had the duck in mind when she aimed and fired the gun, but we find it natural to use this expression in other situations that differ from this simple case. For instance, perception is not a necessary part of having something in mind, as is evinced by the fact that we can have numbers in mind. In addition, we can have an old friend in mind even if we do nothing but entertain the thought; thus, we need not exhibit overt physical behavior directed at
an object in order to have that object in mind. Despite the variety, the intuitive notion IM unfailingly applies, a fact that suggests the presence of a single relation between agent and object in all of these examples. Call this relation $M$, and as these examples demonstrate, $M$ is complex and various. Any account of it must accommodate these variations along with the simple cases like aiming. After rehearsing the results of our preliminary investigation, I examine more closely the ways in which $M$ can vary. I close the section by stating my analysis of what it is to stand in relation $M$ with an item (i.e., of what it is to have that item in mind).

The case of aiming supplies us with insight into the complex structural and functional character of IM. This relation has a structure constituted by cognitively mediated agent-object connections— the structural aspect—and it supports a wide range of object-focused activity— the functional aspect. We selected the case of aiming as our initial point of focus because it involved an agent who exploited a relationship with a concrete individual for the purpose of achieving a practical goal—in all of these respects, the case of aiming can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of acting with a particular thing in mind. However, as we have noted, there are many acceptable applications of IM that differ from the case of aiming in various ways. Any analysis of relation $M$ must make it clear why these qualify as acceptable despite their differences if it is to serve as an adequate analysis of the intuitive notion IM. We will get at this range of non-paradigmatic cases is by focusing on the salient parts of the expression, “acting with a particular thing in mind,” viz., “acting”, “a particular thing”, and “with ____ in mind.”

1.1 Objects

We’ll begin with “a particular thing”. In the aiming case, the thing to which the agent was $M$-related a concrete individual, viz., a duck, but the object to which the agent is $M$-related need by neither concrete nor an individual. It could be abstract instead of concrete: you can have a number in mind, or King Lear, or a fact. It could be a collection of objects instead of an individual: you can have your children in mind, or your aches and pains. Two metaphysical constraints on the object relatum in $M$ stand out here: (a) the object be the sort of thing that one could have in mind; that is, it must be the sort of thing that the agent could have a belief about,
and (b) the object or objects be represented as particulars, whether particular individuals or particular collections.\textsuperscript{1} Objects that can be represented as particulars would include those things that could causally influence the agent as well as things, such as fictional characters, to which the agent could only be descriptively related. Thus, “a particular thing” can be interpreted very broadly. Nevertheless, as we will see in the next section, the object in a particular case will condition the type of connection required for an instantiation of relation $M$.

\textit{II.2 Thoughts}

We turn next to “with \textit{___} in mind.” Here we examine the agent-object connections in virtue of which an agent has an object in mind, or what we have called the \textit{structural} aspect of relation $M$. In our paradigm case, the connection between agent and object is causal, and more specifically, perceptual. As before, though, relation $M$ does not require this type of connection. The admissible connections vary widely, although we can systematically arrange them into three different types. First, we have what I will call \textit{bare causal relatedness}. This sort of connection is evinced in cases where cognitive states arise from causal interactions with an object and subsequently influence the behavior of an agent even though the agent is unable to describe the object uniquely or perhaps at all. Second, we have \textit{bare descriptive relatedness}; connectivity of this sort is illustrated by cases where a person has had no causal transactions with an item but can nevertheless think of it under a uniquely identifying description (e.g., “the shortest spy”) or is differentially disposed toward it because of past association with descriptive information (e.g., when someone reminds you of a fictional character). The third type of connection consists of a complex combination of causal and descriptive elements. For instance, when one perceives an item or thinks of a close friend under a description, one has an item in mind and is supported in this by both descriptive and causal links. In these cases, it would be a mistake to think that one of the elements dominates while the other is superfluous—both might be crucial to the episode. This is true, for example, when you perceive an object for the purpose of recording facts about it, i.e., when you observe it, or when you think of your friend because you recognize her as the one who fits the description.\textsuperscript{1}
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A common way of thinking about these connections is in terms of *discriminating knowledge*. Above, I noted that when an agent aims at something, she must focus her attention on that thing—she must "have it in her sights," so to speak. These metaphors suggest that in order to have something in mind in this way, an agent must be able to discriminate, or individuate the item. That is, she must have "discriminating knowledge"—she knows the identity of the object in question, and she is able to distinguish it from other objects.\(^1\) This sort of knowledge comes in three flavors: descriptive, demonstrative, and recognitional.\(^1\) The first of these consists of descriptive information sufficient to denote that item in particular.\(^1\) The second, demonstrative knowledge, is provided by perceptual contact; this contact sets up what Evans (1982) calls a "channel" along which information passes from the object of perception to the perceiver. Finally, recognitional knowledge can be either perceptual or non-perceptual. It could be grounded in past perceptual contact with an item—an agent has seen it or heard it or etc. and that gave her the ability to identify it as that item if she is ever in perceptual contact with it again—but it need not be. One could acquire the ability to recognize an item from a sufficiently robust description without having any perceptual contact with that item. A characteristic feature of this sort of knowledge is that one might have the ability to recognize an object without having any ability to produce individuating information about the item, and this is true whether it is perceptual or non-perceptual. Thus, recognitional knowledge cannot be reduced to descriptive knowledge, and so represents a legitimate third category.

While it is true that relation \(M\) requires that there be a cognitive connection between an agent and an object that differentially disposes the agent toward that object, it is not clear that this cognitive connection must qualify as *knowledge*. When discussing demonstrative and descriptive connections between agent and object it seems correct to talk in terms of knowledge, given that these connections involve representational mental states that can be justified and true. However, recognitional knowledge would appear to be a misnomer. Such an ability must have a cognitive, or at least a neurological, basis: the brain must have been modified as a result of interactions with the object in question, and the states that result must be responsible for
differential influence on the behavior of the agent. Even so, the states need not be available to the agent for consideration and evaluation; indeed, the agent may be wholly unable to say anything about them. Further, given that these states need not be regarded as having propositional content, it’s not clear how we are to assess them for truth or falsity. For these reasons, it seems mistaken to classify this sort of connection in the same category with demonstrative and descriptive connections.¹

From the perspective of relation $M$, however, it is preferable to treat the various agent-object
A Model of Relation $M$

I. Structural Aspect

Object

$\Phi$

Causal Relatedness

and/or

Descriptive Relatedness

Agent

Cognitive States

II. Functional Aspect

Activated Cognitive States

1. Are they the object of selective focus and attention?

No

Yes

Activated Cognitive States

Intentional Cognitive Action (*)

Intentional Physical Action (*)

Selective Focus & Attention

Etc.

Reasoning

Calculating

Planning

Intentional Physical Action (*)

2. Is $\Phi$ essential to the character of the intentional action that is supported or influenced by the activated cognitive states?

No

Relation $M$ Does Not Obtain

Yes

Relation $M$ Obtains

$\rightarrow$ Causes

$\rightarrow$ Denotes

$\rightarrow$ Activation

$\rightarrow$ Constrains

$\rightarrow$ Supports

Figure 1
connections uniformly if we can identify a principled theoretical framework into which they all fit; after all, these connections ostensibly play the same type of role in supporting episodes in which relation $M$ obtains. The causal-descriptive framework described above is such a framework, and for that reason I will use it to characterize the agent-object connections which constitute the structural aspect of relation $M$. In opting for this framework, however, I do not wish to ignore the appeal of the discriminating knowledge approach. In fact, we can map the three types of cognitive connectivity recognized on this approach onto our framework of choice. Descriptive knowledge, if unsupported by causal connectivity, would be classified as bare descriptive relatedness, as would non-perceptual recognitional knowledge. Perceptual recognitional knowledge would count as bare causal relatedness, assuming there is no descriptive information available to buttress it. Finally, demonstrative knowledge would qualify as combined relatedness, since in most cases perception consists of the gathering of information conveyed along a causal channel.

II.3 Actions

At this point, though, it is important to note that analyses of IM in terms of the mind’s ability to represent the world as being thus-and-so *alone* will not do. When we say of someone that they have a particular thing in mind, we implicitly assert that they are differentially related to that thing in particular in the context of intentional action. To have a thing in mind is to have it in mind while acting.

We turn now to the last part of the expression “acting with some thing in mind”, viz., “acting”. Here we address what we have called the *functional* aspect of relation $M$. In our paradigm case, the agent is acting with something in mind, both at a cognitive level and at an overt behavioral level; however, as before, it need not be this way. There need be no overt action at all, such as when you find yourself thinking of a friend without acting on that thought. However, as we established in § I, there must be action at some level, even if it is only cognitive activity such as selective attention, planning, decision making, etc. In what follows, I consider the implication of this for the functional aspect of relation $M$. 
As we have seen, the functional aspect is related to activity that involves exploitation of the connections between agent and object—these connections are activated and exert influence on the intentional actions of the agent. It would be helpful to think of this aspect as having the structure of a hierarchy. We begin with non-intentional cognitive activity, i.e., the activation of cognitive states which connect agent and object. This activity is necessary but insufficient for relation $M$ to obtain. To get an instance of relation $M$, we can go in one of two directions. First, the activity could support selective focus and attention. The intentional cognitive activity could be more involved than this, of course, but it must begin with focus and attention. Beyond this, there might be reasoning or other complex thinking, such as what is involved when you work on a math problem. There might also be decision-making or planning designed to extend the influence of the $M$-related object beyond the current cognitive episode. This sort of behavior results in plans, and when these are executed we get further intentional actions. Among these we find overt physical actions, such as the aiming and target shooting in our paradigm case. Second, if the activity does not support selective focus and attention—that is, if it is not consciously accessible to the agent—then, as we have seen, it must influence the overt intentional behavior of the agent.

We still do not have a sufficient condition, however. We could be structurally related to an object via cognitive states which are active in the context of intentional action and still not have an instance of relation $M$. Consider the following two cases:

3. You are looking at a friend who sits across a table from you. You are concentrating on her intently, blocking out everything else. Among the things you block out is the table, which is a part of your visual field.

4. You're at a party, and you see a very tall acquaintance walk in. You know that he is over 6-5. He proceeds to join a group that includes people who are taller than he is. Later, in a conversation on the preponderance of tall guys at the party, you utter the sentence, "I bet that the tallest person in this room is taller than 6-5."\(^1\)

In the first case, you are causally related via perceptual states to the table, and it seems
reasonable to think that the table exerts some structuring influence on your intentional behavior, given that it is at this table where both of you are seated. Nevertheless, you do not have the table in mind as you look at your friend. In the second case, you are structurally related to the tall acquaintance and he has influenced your utterance, in that he motivated your selection of the height of 6 feet, 5 inches and so influenced your intentional verbal behavior. Even so, it does seem correct to say that you have him in mind when you produce the utterance above. You certainly did have him in mind in selecting 6-5 as the height, but if someone takes you up on your bet, you will claim victory if someone other than your acquaintance is the tallest person in the room; it seems incorrect to say that you have specifically him in mind when making the wager; in fact, it seems that you have no one in particular in mind. Therefore, we have a conflict: our analysis at this point implies that you have the table in mind in (3) and the tall acquaintance in mind in (4), but our intuitions disagree.

We can resolve this conflict by noting that where we intuitively have an object in mind, the object to which we are \( M \)-related is essential to the character and success of the relevant intentional actions. More specifically, the object must figure into the cognitive states that constitute the nature of the intentional action, and the character of this involvement will vary depending on the type of action in question. If the action is goal-directed, as with our aiming case and (2) above, the object must figure into the goals or sub-goals that are to be achieved if the action is to be successful (i.e., the object figures into the success conditions of the action). If the action is not goal-directed, as with (1), the object must figure into specification of the content of the cognitive states on which the agent directs their focus and attention. In (3), by contrast, the table does not figure into the success conditions of your action of looking at your friend, and in (4), the tall acquaintance does not figure into the success conditions of your wager.

11.4 The Analysis

Close inspection of the expression, “acting with some thing in mind”, has revealed the complexity and range of situations in which relation \( M \) obtains between agents and objects. Any analysis of the relation that ignores this complexity cannot be adequate. With this fact in mind, I
offer this analysis of the relation:

An agent $S$ is $M$-related to an item $N$ (i.e., $S$ has $N$ in mind) iff

A. **Ontological Constraint:** $N$ is the type of thing that could be mentally represented by $S$.

B. **Structural Constraint:** $S$ is related to $N$ in virtue of cognitive states that
   i. are consequences of causal interactions between $S$ and $N$, or
   ii. have representational content that denotes $N$ uniquely, or
   iii. are some combination of (a) and (b).

C. **Functional Constraint:**
   i. The cognitive states in (2) are active and exert influence on $S$’s behavior, and
   ii. this behavior includes intentional action, either at the cognitive or overtly physical levels or both, and
   iii. $N$ is *essential* to the character of the intentional action by figuring into the specification of either
      a. the goals or sub-goals that must be accomplished if the action is to be successful, or
      b. the content of the cognitive states on which the agent focuses.

III. **A Model of Relation $M$ In Action**

In this section I examine how the analysis of relation $M$ just presented fares with respect to the range of cases in which the relation obtains. To that end, I develop a graphical model of the relation as it has been analyzed above. With the help of this model, I argue that this analysis accommodates the intuitive cases in which an agent has something in mind and does justice to the complex character of this cognitive phenomenon.

III.1 **The Model**
My goal in this section is to evaluate the analysis offered above against a range of cases in which we wish to say that an agent has something in mind. We could do this by sifting through intuitive cases, but I prefer to lead with the analysis and not intuitions about specific cases. This approach has the virtue of being more systematic, and it is also not as dependent on the strength of one’s imagination. To implement this approach, it will be helpful if we recast the conditions in the form of a graphical model that displays the various levels of activity at which one can be said to have some thing in mind, according to the analysis. This model will reveal more vividly the range of cases accommodated by the analysis and will also establish that the analysis agrees with our intuitions about relation $M$. Figure 1 contains this graphical model.

We set aside the Ontological Constraint and focus instead on the Structural and Functional constraints. The main role of the Ontological Constraint is to indicate how metaphysically liberal relation $M$ is. The first part of the figure, then, displays what is required for satisfaction of the Structural Constraint: the agent must have cognitive states that are related to an item (a) causally, as direct or indirect effects of causal interactions with $N$, (b) descriptively, in virtue of content that denotes $N$, or (c) by some combination of (a) and (b). If the agent has cognitive states that are related to the object in this way, then we can say that the agent and the object are *structurally related*.

Structural relatedness is necessary but insufficient for $M$-relatedness. In addition, the cognitive states must be activated and, further, they must be a part of an intentional action. Here we have moved to discussion of the Functional Aspect, and the figure illustrates the range of ways in which the activation of cognitive states in the context of intentional action could satisfy the Functional Constraint and so could count as an instance of having some thing, viz., $N$, in mind. On the one hand, the activated states might be the object of selective focus and attention, i.e., the agent might focus on $N$ through their representational content. Since selective focus and attention are themselves *intentional* cognitive actions, this is the first point at which we can say that an agent could have something in mind, viz., $N$, pending satisfaction of the part (iii) of the Functional Constraint. The cognitive states that support selective focus and attention could also
figure into other intentional cognitive actions, such as calculation, theoretical reasoning, problem solving, and planning. The variety here is considerable, but we needn’t canvass it to make the point that these also supply contexts within which relation $M$ could obtain. It is worth noting at this point that planning, in particular, supports further intentional actions through the execution of the resultant plans. These actions can be either cognitive or practical, depending on the nature of the goal that motivates one’s planning.

On the other hand, if the activated states are not the object of selective focus and attention, they must nevertheless constrain the development of intentional activity of the cognitive or physical sort. As I have argued, states that leave no causal signature on intentional action supply no reason to the agent or observer that the agent has anything in mind. These states are not themselves the content of any intentional action, but they can influence it in a variety of ways. For example, they can *structure* an episode, activating cognitive networks and contingencies that render an agent’s decisions and actions sensitive to a particular object. In addition, they can *trigger* an episode, perhaps in virtue of a connection with perceptual information or information drawn from memory.¹ For relation $M$ to obtain in the absence of selective focus and attention, there must be some indirect link to intentional action.

If the agent is influenced or constrained in performing an intentional action, either cognitive or physical, by activated cognitive states that are structurally related to $N$, then the agent could have $N$ in mind if, in addition, it is *essential* to the character of the action; that is, if $N$ figures into the specification of the cognitive states that constitute the nature of the intentional action in question. It is essential if it satisfies either condition C.iii.a or C.iii.b in the analysis given above.

### III.2 Applications

In what follows, I examine the range of cases to which this analysis applies, arguing that it accommodates the intuitive cases of acting with some thing in mind. We intuitively regard an agent as having some thing in mind in situations where there is evidence that the agent’s actions depend on that item for their character and success. This evidence is available from two
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perspectives: the perspective of the agent (i.e., the first-person perspective) and the perspective of the observer (i.e., the third-person perspective). Let’s begin with the first-person perspective. An agent $S$ would have reason to say that they have an object $N$ in mind when they plan actions around it, such as in the aiming case and (2). In such a case, $N$ forms a part of the goal that $S$ wishes to achieve and toward which they plan a course of action. But $S$ would also have reason to say that they have $N$ in mind if they selectively focus and attend to it through cognitive states that stand in structural relationships to it, whether or not those thoughts figure into planning or physical action. In such a case, $S$ entertains thoughts about a particular object, focusing attention on that object through those thoughts, as in (1). Turning to the third-person perspective, an observer would have reason to regard $S$ as having an object $N$ in mind if it were apparent that $S$’s actions were goal-directed and $N$ figures into the specification of the goal, such as in the aiming case and (2). This perspective does not support the same range of applications of the notion of having some thing in mind as the first-person perspective, though. On the one hand, if there is no physical action available as a cue, as in (1) above, the third-person perspective would not supply justification for asserting that $S$ is $M$-related to any object. On the other, this perspective supports applications that the first-person perspective does not. Consider the following case:

5. You notice that $S$ goes home from work by a different and more roundabout route than she normally takes. This route takes her by the house into which an old friend just moved. You ask her why she goes home by this route and she says that she does not know.

In this case, there might be good reason to assert that $S$ has her old friend in mind in taking that route home, even while allowing that $S$ is unaware of what she is doing. Here you have a better idea of what $S$ is doing than $S$ herself and so are in a position to say that she has a particular thing in mind when acting even while she is not. Note that in such a case, it would be natural for $S$ to respond by saying that she must have had her old friend in mind, even though she didn’t realize it. Finally, note that if there is no evidence forthcoming from either perspective, there is no reason to say that $S$ has any object in mind at all.
This classification of intuitive cases is exhaustive, since all of them will make evidence available from at least one of the two perspectives. If we turn back to our model at this point, we will note that it accommodates all of these cases and excludes those that must excluded, and it does so for the same reasons that we used to classify the intuitive cases. The evidence that motivates an observer to say that $S$ has an object $N$ in mind is recovered from observation of actions that are supported or influenced by cognitive states connected to $N$ and that depend for their character on $N$. Thus, the aiming case would be an example of intentional physical action that would be located under the affirmative response to the first question in the model, while (2) and (5) would be examples of intentional physical actions that fall under the negative answer to that question. In all of these cases, relation $M$ obtains, given that the actions depend for their character on the objects in question. By contrast, an agent will say that they have something in mind when they are focused on that object through cognitive states that represent it either causally or descriptively, as the agents are in the aiming case and in (1). The first-person evidence that motivates an agent in such a case to say that they have something in mind will be cognitive evidence of the sort that is found under the affirmative response to the first question in the model. Thus, given an affirmative answer to the second question in the model, relation $M$ obtains in these cases as well. Thus, our analysis of relation $M$ and the model it supports line up as they should with our intuitions about what it is to have some thing in mind.

### III.3 Loose Ends

Before closing, there are a few loose ends to which we should attend. First, the analysis implies that an agent can have more than one thing in mind at a time, which is as it should be. An agent might have more than one thing in mind because multiple objects are essential to the character of their action and either (a) they are able to focus on all of them at once, or (b) they are focused on some of them and merely influenced by the others. Second, the analysis is not dependent on any view of reference, and so it can support application of the notion of having some thing in mind whether the agent is causally related to that item or related by description. This is a virtue, though, since there are many ways in which an item can influence an
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individual’s behavior.

However, even if one grants that the second fact is virtuous for the stated reason, one might argue that on balance this flexibility is vicious because it renders the analysis too permissive. There are two ways that this argument might go. The first points to cases involving descriptive relatedness that appear problematic.¹ For example, say I utter the sentence, “The shortest spy is a spy”, not knowing anything about the identity of the shortest spy. Intuitively it seems that I don’t have the shortest spy in mind, but it might be claimed that our analysis requires me to say that in fact I do. This claim would be false, however. It is true that while I am related by this description to the shortest spy, in conformity with the Structural Constraint, the shortest spy is not essential to the character of my action; rather, it is the descriptive condition that is essential, as one would expect given that this is a classically attributive use of the noun phrase. Thus, if anything, I have the descriptive condition in mind, but not the shortest spy. The second development of this argument concerns causal relatedness, and in particular the causal relatedness that all of my cognitive states bear to me.¹ All of my cognitive states are causally related to me, so isn’t it the case that our analysis has the counterintuitive implication that I have myself in mind whenever any of these states are activated in the context of intentional action? I have two responses to this. First, it’s not altogether clear that we don’t have ourselves in mind when we perform most of our intentional actions, a fact that would render this implication much less counterintuitive. Second, in those cases where we would insist that we don’t have ourselves in mind, we would perforce be acting without self-consciousness; if this is so, we would not figure into the specification of the content of our goals, sub-goals, or other relevant cognitive states and so the Functional Constraint in our analysis would not be satisfied.

IV. Conclusion

We say that an agent “has an object in mind” when we have evidence that they are thinking about an object in particular. This evidence is made available through intentional action, either to the observer through overt physical action or to the agent through cognitive
actions such as selective focus and attention. Thus, when an agent has an object in mind, they have it in mind while acting, and this implies that we must look for our analysis of this notion in the context of action. Turning our attention to this context, we note that we often perform actions without any particular object in mind at all, such as in (4). Thus, the class of actions performed by agents who have an object in mind is a sub-class of all intentional actions. It is, however, a sizeable and important sub-class; indeed, no account of human action could be adequate unless it supplied a principled distinction between this class and its complement.

In this essay I offer an analysis that is designed to mark off this class, and so this essay can be seen as a contribution to a broader theory of action. To be a member of this class, an action must be performed by an agent who is related in a certain way to an object via their cognitive states. The goal is to identify this relation, but it isn’t especially obvious; after all, many objects influence our actions at any one time, and we are connected via the semantic properties of our cognitive states to many more. Clearly, though, we do not have all of these items in mind when we perform actions. Thus, we must identify the specific constraints that are operative on agent and object if the action performed by the agent is to fall within the class of actions performed by agents who have an object in mind. The analysis I have developed identifies this class as comprising actions performed by agents who stand in the $M$ relation to particular objects. An agent acts when $M$-related to a particular object just in case they perform an action that is (a) supported or otherwise influenced by active cognitive states that are related causally or descriptively to a particular item, and (b) dependent for its character and success on that item.

V. References


VI. Notes

1. Acknowledgments.

2. De re belief and singular thought, while closely related, are not identical. The primary difference is that singular thought carries with it the implication of occurrence, whereas de re belief does not. We can take singular thought to be an occurrent thought that includes as a part of its content the content of a de re belief.


8. Others are not so easily classified. Pollock (1980) develops an account of de re thought that is non-descriptive and would appear to depend on causal relations to underwrite his epistemic requirements, but the nature of the relation between believer and object of belief that is supplied by de re representations is not made clear. Lycan (1986), in discussing the representational character of beliefs, recognizes several “grades of aboutness”, among which are included grades that involve a causal relation between believer and object of belief as well as an epistemic “ken” relation; the first of these (grade 4) is similar to those recognized by the second group, whereas the second (grade 5) is similar to those recognized by the first group.
Not all the accounts of *de re* belief we have considered can be extended naturally so as to apply to the notion of *having a particular thing in mind*. In what follows, I restrict my attention to those that do.

Many commentators use the term “*de re* belief” in talking about all manner of singular thoughts, i.e., thoughts about particular objects. While it is clear that singular thoughts need not involve beliefs—they could involve desires, hopes, dreams, etc.—this discussion brings out another difference: “singular thought” implies that the thought in question is occurrent, whereas “*de re* belief” carries with it no such implication.

For a discussion of the intentional character of such acts, see Müller (1992).

One might think that a case in which someone acts with something in mind but vehemently denies it would be just the thing we seek. Here, the agent might repress the object of his action, or he might be guilty of bad faith. However, the action here is intentional, and it does supply information that could enable the agent or a sufficiently perceptive observer to determine the identity of that object. It is crucial that the case involve no intentional overt action.


Other proponents of the Satisfactional Approach include Kaplan (1968), and Sosa (1970) and (1971).

For other examples that support this point, see Pollock (1980).

This example is patterned after one found in Bach (1987), p. 16, although Bach uses his example to argue for a relational view of *de re* belief.
By aiming at an analysis that accommodates variety along these dimensions, I am after an account goes beyond those that can be recovered from Devitt (1981), Lycan (1986), and Bach (1987). The analysis in each of these works requires that a causal relation obtain, limiting the range of objects to those that can enter into causal transactions and ruling out abstract objects and collections as things that an agent can have in mind. The analysis also goes beyond that found in Kronfeld (1990), which recognizes only the relation of denotation between agent and object as relevant to an understanding of this notion.

For an argument, grounded in concern about objects, that is skeptical of the problem of having something in mind, see Unger (1980), pp. 456-458.

Both of these cases have close affinity to what are called dual-aspect uses of definite descriptions. One makes a dual-aspect use of a definite description when one uses it referentially and attributively at the same time; in other words, both the descriptive condition and the intended referent are essential to the claim made by the speaker. In the cases under consideration, both descriptive and causal connections are essential to the episodes in that if either were absent, the action performed with that thing in mind would not be successful. For more on the dual-aspect use, see O’Rourke (1998).


So this case would differ in this respect from our paradigmatic example of aiming—in the aiming case, the relation between the agent and the duck is mediated by perception and not by descriptive information. We could modify the example slightly, though, and thereby bring it in line with the descriptive case simply by replacing the perceptual fix the agent has on the duck with a descriptive fix, say because she is trying to hit it while wearing a blindfold.

It might seem that we could avoid the difficulties mentioned and still regard recognitional ability as a type of knowledge if we take it to be knowledge how and not knowledge that. Notice, however, that on this interpretation it is still different in kind from descriptive and demonstrative
connections, both of which seem assimilable to *knowledge that*.

20 This case is a variation on one found in Donnellan (1978).

21 For more on this distinction, see Dretske (1988), chs. 2, 4, and 5.

22 I am grateful to Neil Feit for discussion of this argument.

23 I am grateful to Ron Wilburn for discussion of this argument.