



Mental Actions

Lucy O'Brien and Matthew Soteriou

Print publication date: 2009

Print ISBN-13: 9780199225989

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: February 2010

DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199225989.001.0001

Mental Actions and the No-Content Problem

Lucy O'Brien (Contributor Webpage)

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199225989.003.0011

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter argues that a certain kind of object-dependent externalism can be shown to be problematic when we focus on the role of mental action in our thinking. The mental action the chapter focuses on is supposition. The problem raised for this kind of externalism is to explain what is going on when an attempt to make a supposition with a demonstrative content fails, due to the fact that there is no relevant object available to be demonstratively referred to, and hence no content to suppose. The chapter considers a number of responses to this problem the object-dependent externalist might offer, and argues that all are, in one way or another, inadequate. In particular, they fail to provide an adequate answer to the ontological question: what is going on in the mental life of the subject when this kind of failure of self-knowledge takes place?

Keywords: no-content problem, object-dependent, kind-dependent, externalism, supposition, disjunctivism, self-knowledge

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I want to suggest that a consideration of mental action reveals a certain kind of externalism about mental content to be more problematic than we have come to think. The externalism I have in mind is generally called object-dependent externalism. The object-dependent externalist about demonstrative thoughts (ODE) I have in mind holds three theses:

1. The Object-Dependence thesis: there are demonstrative thought contents such as 'That glass is heavy' which are object-dependent. If there is no object demonstrated, then there is no content.

2. The Unity of Content thesis: there is just one content that characterizes our thought. A thought, or a constituent of a thought, cannot, for example, be constituted out of a pair of parallel contents.¹

3. Dependence of Thought on Content thesis: all thoughts are constituted by contents. If there is no content there is no thinking.

It follows from these three theses that there can be object-dependent demonstrative thoughts: thoughts that are such that had there been no object of the relevant kind, in the relevant relation to the subject, there could have been no thought. So, if were no glass to be the object of the demonstrative thought 'That glass is heavy' there would be no content for the thought to be constituted from, and so no thought either. If the argument of this chapter is right this version of externalism, in contrast to kind-dependent externalism, is a hard view to maintain in the face of a serious consideration of what is going when there is content failure in the case of mental action.

(p.216) 2. THE NO-CONTENT PROBLEM

Let us take a relatively unproblematic example of a mental action:

(1) A supposing that *P* (where *A* is a subject and *P* a content).

Those who believe that there are no mental actions will obviously not accept that a supposition is a mental action. However, for most who accept that there are at least some mental actions, suppositions will seem an unproblematic example of one. Unlike judgements, or denials, suppositions are often voluntary. I can suppose that *P*, in order to work out, for example, what I would do in circumstances in which *P* was true, simply by willing to suppose that *P*.

However, in order for me simply to suppose that *P*, certain conditions have to be in place. In particular, whatever conditions are required for there to be a content *P* have to be in place. It is by now a familiar thought, indeed almost an orthodox one, that there are external conditions on content that can fail. Let us suppose then that *P* is a content with external conditions that can fail. There are two sorts of content that have been thought to be dependent upon external conditions: kind-dependent contents (such as, 'Water cleans') or object-dependent contents (such as 'That glass is heavy').

In this chapter I will consider as an example the following putative case of an object-dependent demonstrative thought: A supposes that *that* glass is heavy. We are familiar with action failure in the case of physical actions. It can seem to a subject that she raised her arm, when in fact she failed to. The suggestion often made is that if we take tryings to be antecedents of actions we can explain such failure by appealing to the idea that while the subject failed to raise her arm, she nevertheless tried to raise it. And her trying to raise it is what explains why she thinks that she raised it when she did not. (Note that there is similar story in terms of prior intentions or motor intentions: the subject knows what she

intended to do and the explanation of it seeming to her that she raised her arm is to be explained in terms of her intention to move her arm.)

Now consider a case of action failure in the case of supposition. Suppose that at t , A makes the object-dependent supposition that *that* glass is heavy, and that at a later time t' , it seems to A just as it seemed to her when she made the object-dependent supposition. Suppose, however, that at t' there is no object available bearing the required relation to A, and thus that there is no content for A to be supposing true. It just seems to A that she is supposing that P , but she can be doing no such thing: there is no content P available in the situation for her supposing to be a supposing of.

Faced with a failed action of this kind it is clear that we cannot make the move that was suggested in the case of failed physical action. We cannot explain the action by saying that A carried out a prior action of trying to suppose that P . **(p. 217)** If there is no possibility of supposing that P , due to content failure, then there is no possibility of trying to suppose that P —due to content failure. For one needs to be able think the content P if one is to try to bring it about that one supposes P , just as much as one does if one is to suppose P . So, it is a striking thing about failures of content in the case of mental action that there does not seem to be the possibility of retreating to a trying or intention to explain the failure.

3. ACTION FAILURE DUE TO CONTENT FAILURE

So, the question now arises: if not in terms of tryings or intentions, how *should* we explain what is happening when it seems to a subject just as it does when she has supposed that P , but has not due to a failure of content?

The problem as it arises for mental actions, with object-dependent mental contents, is a version of the broader problem as it arises for any *occurrent* mental phenomena with object-dependent content. The postulation of object-dependent content allows for there to be failures of self-knowledge. It allows, as we might put it following the perception literature, for there to be good cases and bad cases.

- (i) In the good case: it seems to A that she is supposing that P , and she is supposing that P .
- (ii) In the bad case: it seems to A as if she is supposing that P , but she is not supposing that P . In fact there is no content indicated by ' P '.²

There are two kinds of question one can ask when presented with the bad case. One can ask *epistemic questions* of the kind: How does A know that she is supposing P , in the good case, if she cannot rule out being in the bad case? Does A have an epistemic justification for whatever thought she does have in the bad case? Such epistemic questions have been the focus of much of the literature on externalism.

But one can also ask *ontological questions* of the kind: What is going on in A's mental life when this kind of failure of self-knowledge takes place? An act of supposing that *P* is, I have assumed, a dated event the initiation over which I have control: I can decide to suppose that *P* and go ahead, right **(p.218)** then and suppose that *P*. But given that in the bad case there is no content *P*, the acts of supposing *P*, deciding to *P*, and trying to suppose *P* cannot take place—but what psychological event does take place in cases of content failure? And if no psychological event takes place, how are we to explain what is going on in the bad case? It is these ontological questions that I am interested in here.³

3.1. First Attempt: Thinking one is Supposing that *P*

Perhaps we can explain what is going on by appealing to a higher order activity, say the activity of thinking that one is supposing:

(A) A can think that she is supposing that *P* when in fact she is not supposing that *P* (because there is no content *P*).

But, this is no better than the appeal to trying to suppose that *P*, that we rejected above. If there is no content *P*, A cannot suppose *P* and A cannot think that she supposes *P*. Therefore, if there is no content expressed by '*P*', then (A) cannot be the right way to capture the failure: it is false or meaningless. As Bell has put it:

The difficulty crudely speaking, is that either the non-existence of the embedded, merely apparent thought will contaminate the second-order thought of which it is a part, or, conversely, the intelligibility of the second order thought will bestow respectability on its first order component. (Bell 1988: 51)

3.2. Second Attempt: A Gap?

Perhaps the assumption that there is an act of mind—a psychological event—that constitutes the failure is an unwarranted one? There is a familiar distinction between failures of *omission* and failures of *commission*. We may be making the mistake of assuming that we have here a failure of commission, rather than one of omission. We seem to have assumed that there must be something that A does which constitutes her failure to suppose the *P*, rather than simply that A fails to suppose *P* and that therein lies her failure. Perhaps in cases of content failure there is a gap in the psychological stream where otherwise an act of mind would have been. Perhaps McDowell has something like this in mind when he says:

there can only be a gap—an absence—at, so to speak, the relevant place in the mind—the place where, given that the sort of *de re* sense in question appears to be instantiated, there appears to be a specific *de re* sense (McDowell 1984: 103; quoted in Bell 1988)⁴

(p.219) The problem is that we have in such cases not only a failure to suppose *P*, but we have a subject to whom it is *as if* she supposed *P*, and we have to explain that appearance. When the subject introspects she does not notice a gap in her mental life, even while reflecting closely on how things are for her.

Further it is attractive to think that the phenomenology of our mental actions is sensitive to their contents. It is different for me to suppose *P*, than it is to suppose *Q*, and that difference seems most naturally explained by the contents *P* and *Q* and the differences between them. If it were to A as if she were supposing that *P*, even where there is no content *P*, then we would have to drop this natural story about the phenomenology of thought—at least in bad cases.

Most problematic in my view, the gap view leaves nothing to play the normative role that a contentful act can play when it is there. Even when A fails to suppose that *P*, due to content failure, it seems to her that she supposes that *P*, and she can act and infer as she would, were she were supposing that *P*. On the gap view we have no explanation of why it seems to A that she is supposing that *P*, or of her actions consequent on its seeming to her she is supposing ‘that glass is heavy’, or of her inferring that ‘if my supposition is true, there is at least one heavy glass’. We seem to need *something* to do the normative and epistemic work—some associated act, or some remnant or degraded version of the act one gets in the good case.

It might be helpful to compare this case to the physical action case. When it wrongly seems to me as if I raised my left arm, even though I have in fact lost my left arm or lost motor control of it, we may not want to say that what we have here is a failure of commission—I wrongly thought I raised my left arm, but I did something else instead. We rather want to say that there was simply no physical action here: I thought I acted but failed to do so. We do however want to ask what occurrence in the psychological life of the agent accounts for it seeming to the agent that she moved her arm when she in fact did no such thing, and indeed could have done no such thing given that there was no arm to raise. And we would expect to be able to appeal some psychological event—perhaps an event that precedes or occurs concurrently with the action even when it is successful, or perhaps an event that occurs only when the action is not successful—in order to explain why the subject takes herself to have acted when she has not.

3.3. Third Attempt: Disjoint Contents

It may be suggested that there are different kinds of content involved in the good and bad case. Perhaps there are seemings to suppose in both cases, but that in the good case the seeming to suppose involves A thinking that content *P*, but that in the bad case the seeming to think involves A thinking some other content.

(p.220) 3.3.1. Other Thoughts With Other Contents

There are various alternative contents one might appeal to in order to try to explain the bad case. Perhaps it seems to A as it does because of:

- (i) associated existential thoughts she has, and can have even when there is content failure—perhaps the relevant thought contents are ‘There is an object near me’;
- (ii) distinct singular thoughts she has, and can have even when there is content failure: ‘That spatio-temporal region is F’, say;
- (iii) memory images she has of earlier perceptual experiences;
- (iv) words that A visualizes (or ‘audioizes’) in the imagination. Perhaps A imagines seeing or hearing the contentless sentence ‘That is F’.

All these suggested substituted contents meet something like the same problems. The first and most obvious of which is that it does not seem immediately plausible that alternative contents that are supposed to appear in the bad case will be phenomenologically indistinguishable from our supposing that *P* in the good case. Further, it is not clear how content failure is supposed to occasion such alternative thought contents or indeed why the occasioning of such contents is supposed to count as content failure rather than simply thinking different thoughts. Perhaps the idea is that such contents are not occasioned only in the bad case but are rather always involved in the supposition that *P*. The thought might be that it is only in the absence of the supposition *P* that the alternative thought contents play a role in making it seem to A as if she is supposing *P*. But if this is what is intended it is not clear that we are being offered no real alternative to the gap view: in the bad case things are just as they are in the good case, only with the supposition missing.

It may be said, however, that this view, unlike the gap view, provides contents that can play causal, normative, and epistemic roles in the bad case. But then a final concern with the suggestion is that we will expect these contents, which are distinct from the supposition, to have their own independent causal, normative, and epistemic consequences whether or not they are accompanied by a supposition that *P*. If they are around in the good case we need to know why their presence does not bring about a degree of disruption in that case.

3.3.2. Intentional Contents Distinguished From Real Contents

Rather than appealing to other familiar thoughts with distinct contents in appealing to disjoint contents in the good and bad cases, perhaps we can appeal to the idea that there are different *kinds* of content in the good and bad cases. We might argue for a bifurcation between *types* of contents: between merely *intentional* or *seeming* contents and *real* thought contents. Intentional or seeming contents are understood as not being object-dependent and as being distinct from, but in some way isomorphic to, real contents.

(p.221) However this suggestion has three troubling features. First, it requires postulating contents of some new and unfamiliar sort. Second, it requires the postulated contents to occur only in the bad cases. But it is hard to exclude them

from the good cases also. If its seeming to the subject that she is supposing that 'that is a glass of water' is explained by the occurrence of a merely intentional content in the bad case how do we know such content does not also occur in, and perhaps account for the phenomenology of, the good case? Third, the postulation of a distinct type of content offends against the unity of content thesis that I have assumed is part of the object-dependent externalist position.

3.3.3. Reflective Disjunctivism

Perhaps the most sophisticated attempt to appeal to disjoint contents in order to solve something like our problem comes from the theory of perception.

According to what has been called Reflective Disjunctivism we can characterize what is going on in bad cases without appealing to distinct kinds of intentional content, but rather with reference to what is going on in the good case, and to the nature of an epistemic relation between the good and bad cases.⁵ The reflective disjunctivist claims:

1. What is going on in the bad case is characterized by reference to what is going on in the good case.
2. In particular, what is going on in the bad case is identified as that which is *reflectively indistinguishable* by A from the good case.
3. A bad case is *reflectively indistinguishable* from a good case in virtue of the subject not being able to know by introspective reflection that they are not in the good case. For all the subject knows from introspection, she can judge that she is in a good case.

A more minimal characterization of the position would leave out the ability to judge claim—the claim that 'for all the subject knows, she can judge that she is in a good case'—and just have the inability claim—the subject cannot know by introspection that she is not in the good case. I will come back to the more minimal characterization, but will for now run with the characterization above as I think it has more mileage in the theory of perception. But I want to suggest that it does not have the same resources in the case of failure of content in thought.

In the perceptual case we can make the following claim:

(P) A subject who *hallucinates P* cannot know by introspective reflection that she is not *seeing P*. For all she knows from introspective reflection, she can judge 'I am seeing P.'

(p.222) In the case of thought the parallel claim would be:

(T) A subject who *seems to think that P* cannot know by introspective reflection that she is not *thinking that P*. For all she knows she can judge 'I am thinking P'.

Given (P) we can make sense of how it is for the subject when it seems to her that she is seeing *P* by appeal to the fact that she could, for all she knows to the contrary, rationally judge that she is seeing *P*. The problem for (T) is that the subject's introspective reflective judgements would *also be thoughts*. So if there is no thought

content in the first-order case there will be no possibility of second-order thought content required to make sense of the introspective judgement. In the hallucination case a reflective subject is able to make sense of what she is undergoing by the possibility of an ascent to a level of reflective thoughts for which the subject has content. A contentful ascent is allowed for because the content that constitutes the subject's reflective thoughts can be held to be distinct in kind from the content that constitutes her perceptions, so a lack of content at one level does not immediately imply a lack of content at the other. However, there can be no such ascent in the thought case. The following may be taken to represent the nature of ascent required in the thought case:

1. A is in a bad case undergoing a seeming thought episode E.
2. Bad case E is reflectively indistinguishable from a good case E'.

So,

3. A being in bad case E means that for all A knows on the basis of introspective reflection 'This thought episode E is a thought that *P*'.

But our problem is that A cannot think *that* thought. In fact there are possibly two reasons why A cannot think that thought. First, A cannot think '*P*' so could not judge 'This thought is a thought that *P*'. It is therefore difficult to see how to cash out the claim that for all A knows the thought episode could be a thought episode of thinking that *P*. Second, if the object-dependence externalist is right then it is not clear that A is in a position to think anything about 'this thought', never mind that it is or is not a thought that *P*. For if ODE is right there is no thought there to be demonstratively referred to. And if perceptual demonstrative thoughts about external objects are object-dependent, do we not also have a reason to suppose that introspective demonstrative thoughts about our thoughts are dependent on their existence?

Let us suppose that demonstrative thoughts about thoughts are object-dependent, and that judgements of indistinguishability with respect to thoughts involve reference to demonstrative thoughts about thoughts. Now, since a subject lacks a thought when the thought lacks a content, a subject can make a judgement of indistinguishability with respect to the thoughts only when she *has* real and not seeming thoughts. Therefore, only in the good case is the subject able to **(p.223)** make the relevant indistinguishability claims. The subject seeming to make such judgements in the bad case will in fact be having no thought at all. It may seem to her that she is thinking, and she may seem to judge that her thought is indistinguishable from the last time she thought *P*. But she is neither thinking *P*, nor thinking that her thought is indistinguishable from a previous thinking that *P*.

Perhaps we can meet the problem by embracing disjunctivism not just about the contents of first-order thoughts, but about the indiscriminability judgements also? Appealing again to the distinction between good and bad cases we have:

The good case: If A thinks that T and thinks that T', A can judge that T and T' are indistinguishable. (Say, T is the thought 'That1 glass is heavy' about glass 1, and T' is the thought 'That2 glass is heavy' about glass 2.)

Bad case: Of A's seeming thoughts T and T', A can seemingly judge that T and T' are indistinguishable. A's seeming judgement that T and T' are indistinguishable, is reflectively indistinguishable from A's judgement that T and T' are indistinguishable . . .

But of course, there can be no such judgement. If the problem is a real one in the ascent from the first to second order it will be a real one in the ascent to indiscriminability judgements also.

In raising these problems we have assumed a version of reflective disjunctivism on which it is a problem that the subject could not make a second-order indistinguishability judgement with reference to which we can explain how things seem to her. But, as was suggested earlier, there is room for a more minimal characterization of the reflective disjunctivist's position.

The reflective disjunctivist may deny that they need to appeal to the subject's higher order judgements in the bad case. All that is needed is that that the subject cannot know by introspection that they are not supposing *P*. And the subject who cannot think *P* meets that negative condition because they cannot think that they suppose *P*, and so cannot know that they are not supposing *P*.

However, it is not clear, if that is *all* that is said, that we been provided with any way of distinguishing between the case where there is a failed supposition and the case where there is no act of the mind at all. In both cases there is nothing to know and nothing known. But how do we escape the intuition that when we fail to make a supposition that *P*, due to content failure, there is nevertheless some dateable occurrence in the mind that is distinct from the case in which one does nothing at all. The kind of higher order thought we have found problematic in the bad case would enable us to make the distinction.

However, while the reflective disjunctivist cannot appeal to reflective judgements in the bad case they can appeal to those a subject might make from within the good case. Perhaps we can explain how it seems to the subject when she seems to think that *P*, but doesn't, by saying that her mental occurrence has a character which is such that she does not know she is not in a good case, and **(p.224)** which were she in a good case she would be able to judge her current mental occurrence as indistinguishable from the mental occurrence in the good case.

Let me say two things about this suggestion. (1) It does not get around the thought that we need a characterization of the bad case that a reflective, sufficiently conceptually sophisticated subject *can* appeal to *in the bad case*,

even if she does not need to. In the perceptual case the subject suffering from a hallucination who wonders whether she is so suffering may be able to give some characterization of the state she is in by referring to the contents of her experiences when she has a veridical perception. However, allowing her that requires that she has concepts and modes of reference that she can use in both cases. We cannot meet that requirement in the case of thought.

There is a move that the reflective disjunctivist might make in response to this. Perhaps they will say that while, in the bad case, the subject is not in a position to think the particular content *P*, she is in the position to grasp the idea of a demonstrative thought of a perceptually presented glass and that the indistinguishability claims can be made in reference to such a thought. However, this suggests that the reflective disjunctivist will need to acknowledge that we need to type demonstrative contents in a way that abstracts from the particular object referred to. This acknowledgement is in tension with ODE.⁶

(2) There is an important difference in the resources of the reflective disjunctivist about perception and the reflective disjunctivist about thought. The reflective disjunctivist about perception can allow reflective indistinguishability judgements from the perspective of the bad case. For all the subject knows when suffering from a hallucination she could in those circumstances judge that she is seeing *P*. The case allows a conceptually sophisticated and reflective subject who wonders when she is hallucinating, whether she is hallucinating, to characterize how things seem to her in terms of how they seem to her when she is seeing. The reflective disjunctivist in the object-dependent thought case cannot make such an allowance. We have thus found a reason to prefer the first version of reflective disjunctivism, and found no reason, as reflective disjunctivists about perception, not to.

3.4. Fourth Attempt: Appeal to Sentences

3.4.1. Metalinguistic Appeal

David Bell, in considering the problem about how to account for how things seem to the subject in the case of failures of content in object-dependent thoughts, says the following:

How can I express the way things seem to me? Perhaps the best option is something like:

(5) It seems to me that I am thinking a thought of a kind expressible by the sentence 'a is F'.

(p.225)

Although it has the virtue of concerning an apparent thought that is not a real thought while itself remaining a meaningful sentence, it nevertheless suffers from one basic shortcoming. It is false. (Bell 1988: 52)

It is false, thinks Bell, because when there is content failure it does not seem to the subject as if she is thinking about a sentence: the phenomenology does not have a metalinguistic character. It is hard not to agree with Bell on this. When it seems to me that I am thinking 'That glass is heavy' and I am indeed thinking that glass is heavy, it is highly implausible to suppose that capturing how it seems to me involves me referring to a sentence. And if there is no such reference in the good case, we would hardly fail to notice if it were a critical element in characterizing the phenomenology of the bad case.

3.4.2. Rehearsing Sentences

Subjects can stand in a number of different relations to sentences. A subject can hear or see a sentence; further a subject can retain an image of hearing or seeing a sentence. And as was just brought out, a subject can refer to a sentence. These relations have not proved particularly useful in dealing with how we might characterize the phenomenology in cases of content failure. (See 3.3.1 and 3.4.1 above.) But there is another more direct relationship in which a subject can stand to a sentence. A subject can utter a sentence. And correlative to uttering a sentence by speaking it a subject can rehearse a sentence in thought. One can silently run through or speak a sentence to oneself. And as Pryor puts it: 'Rehearsing sentences to yourself is one way of having occurrent thoughts' (2006: 329 n. 1).

When the sentence is meaningful one runs through the sentence and thereby thinks a thought. But perhaps rehearsing a sentence (or syntactic string) to oneself is also one way of *not* having a thought. When the sentence does not express a thought or is meaningless one may run through the sentence but not thereby think anything—or at least not think the thought expressed by the sentence. The suggestion, then, is that we can deal with problems raised by cases of content failure by claiming that what we have in such cases is a subject rehearsing a meaningless sentence in thought.⁷

The suggestion has a couple of distinct advantages. First, it can draw on the resources of a familiar way of explaining how someone can act in a way that they **(p.226)** take to be meaningful, but which is in fact not. When someone is just starting to speak a language it is highly probable is that they will produce what is in fact a meaningless string in attempting to say something meaningful. It is arguable that small children do this for months. And it is easy to identify what event occurs in place of the meaningful speech act the agent thinks they have carried out. Suppose I take myself to have said 'It is a pleasure to meet you' in French, but have in fact not. Suppose I have in fact said nothing; I have just produced a burble. It remains the case that I have done something—I have produced a meaningless string of noises, which I take to be the speech act. If I can think by silently rehearsing sentences or quasi-sentences then we may have the beginnings of an explanation of what event occurs when someone takes themselves to be uttering a sentence but is not. When someone takes themselves

to be thinking ‘That glass is heavy’ but is not, what they are doing is something like silently rehearsing the string ‘That glass is heavy’ which is meaningless.

We have seen that this suggestion has two distinct advantages. First, it provides us with an event: the rehearsing of a syntactic string that can exist even when there is content failure. Second, it is plausible to claim that the phenomenology of uttering a meaningless sentence could be the same as uttering a meaningful one. Indeed given that we are concerned—in the case at hand—with the very same syntactic string being meaningful or meaningless depending on external conditions we have a reason to think that the phenomenology will be the same.

I have, however, four problems with the suggestion. First, in the case where we have a speaker uttering a meaningless string, and thus failing to say anything by the action produced, we are inclined to say that in the case of failure there was nevertheless something that the speaker was trying to say. In the example, above, I was trying to say ‘It is a pleasure to meet you’ in French when I produced a meaningless burble. If an account of what the subject is trying to do is going to presuppose that the subject be able to think a thought with a content that in some way matches or correlates to what she is trying to do—as seems natural—then appealing to this model in the failed thought case is going to be problematic. I can try to say ‘It is a pleasure to meet you’ in French because I can think ‘It is a pleasure to meet you’ in English. However, in a case of content failure, I cannot *try* to think ‘*That glass is heavy*’ in rehearsing a syntactic string, in virtue of thinking ‘*That glass is heavy*’. If I cannot think the thought, but only try to, that cannot be in virtue of any capacity to think it. In the case of failed physical actions we have our thoughts about what we are up to to fall back on; in the case of acts of thinking we do not.

It may be that the model we have appealed to in the failed speech case is not the right one—perhaps trying to say *P* does not in fact presuppose being able to think *P*. If that is the case, we will be lacking an account in both the failed speech and failed thought case. However, it is surely natural to think that trying to *F* implies the capacity to have a thought involving *F*, and natural to think that there is a disanalogy between the two cases.

(p.227) The second problem with the suggestion that we explain failed thought on the model of failed speech is that while it seems right to say, as Pryor does, that rehearsing a sentence is one way of thinking a thought, it is highly contentious to think it is the *only* way. At least the phenomenological evidence does not *prima facie* support the general thesis: we do not *seem* to be silently talking to ourselves whenever we are thinking. Given that, it is perhaps implausible to take this suggestion as a general explanation of failures of content.

The third problem is that the suggestion does not seem to provide a fine-grained enough solution to the problem of content failure. Consider the case of a subject perceiving two similar glasses: one to her left and one to her right. Suppose she forms a demonstrative thought about each glass. ‘*That1* glass is heavy’ and ‘*That2* glass is heavy’. She does so, one presumes, by attending to, mentally nodding towards each glass. These are distinct thoughts, so if thinking them involves something like the rehearsing the sentences used in their expression then something other than the sentence rehearsed is required to individuate the thought: the sentences themselves are not syntactically distinct. Also required for distinguishing the thoughts is the picking out, focusing on, attending to, the objects in order for the thought to be fully completed.

But now consider a complex hallucination that is phenomenologically indistinguishable from the case just considered. In this case there are two instances of content failure—the subject both fails to think ‘*That1* glass is heavy’ and fails to think ‘*That2* glass is heavy’ but it seems to her just as it seems to the subject in the good case. That is, it seems to her that she is thinking two thoughts and it seems to her that they are distinct thoughts.

The appeal to silently rehearsing syntactic/sentence types is not sufficient to explain what is going on in such a case. Given that the sentences rehearsed are identical in the two instances, they are going to underdetermine the phenomenology. One possibility would be to hold that, over and above the silent rehearsal of a sentence, what we have in these cases are distinct acts of attending: on the one hand to what seems to be a glass on the left, and on the other to what seems to be a glass on the right. However, if we are not going to reduplicate our problem as applied to such acts of attending then we are going to have to allow for attentional content, or perceptual content that is not object-dependent. Thus the ODE about thought cannot also be an ODE about attentional content or perceptual content. However, it is very difficult to see what motivation there could be for insisting that there is no content that would characterize the thought if there *were* a content that characterized the act of attention or perception.

The fourth and final problem for the suggestion that in cases of failed thought what we have are silent rehearsals of a sentence, concerns how the suggestion fits with the broader profile of ODE. In particular, there is a question of whether, given certain plausible assumptions, it is consistent with the Unity of Content Thesis and the Dependence of Thought on Content Thesis that were identified as commitments of ODE.

(p.228) Let us take the Dependence of Thought on Content thesis first. The claim is that we fail to think a thought, but rather silently run through a sentence. But what is silently rehearsing a sentence if not a kind of thinking? And if silently rehearsing a sentence is a kind of thinking then there is on the

suggestion contentless thought. I think ODE can deal with this quite easily. Consider the case of speech. It is plausible to say that I said nothing when I tried to say 'It is a pleasure to meet you' in French, but produced a bit of burble. However, it is also very natural to say that my burbling was a kind of speaking—a deliberate production of my organs of speech. Given the possibility of a similar such ambiguity in the case of thought, ODE can very reasonably suggest that the thinking involved in rehearsing a contentless syntactic string is not the kind of thinking at issue in the Dependence of Thought on Content Thesis.

What of the Unity of Content thesis? The issue here is tricky and a proper resolution of it will not be attempted. However, there is an obvious worry that in taking up the 'inner utterance' suggestion the ODE will be taking a step closer to accepting a dual content thesis for thought. Consider again the case of a subject perceiving two similar glasses, one to her left and one to her right, and forming a demonstrative thought about each glass. '*That1* glass is heavy' and '*That2* glass is heavy'. Suppose that the ODE appeals to the idea of the subject rehearsing a meaningless sentence, to explain what is going on in the case in which the subject is having a complex hallucination that is phenomenologically indistinguishable from the case just considered. Then what reason does ODE have not to take the subject to be rehearsing a sentence in the good case also? And if the subject *is* rehearsing a sentence in the good case also it is extremely plausible that, like uses of the demonstrative 'that' in English, what we have is a general content that determines a context-dependent content in use. If this is right, then while there may be distinct, perspectival singular contents characterizing each thought, such contents will be dependent upon the application of a general content that is grasped in understanding the general meaning of the words 'That glass is heavy'.

If there is a general content that is grasped in understanding the words 'That glass is heavy' then it appears that we have more than one kind of content to appeal to. Thus, in cases of reference failure, while there may be no distinct singular contents characterizing each thought, there will be distinct acts of applying a general content that can be appealed to in the explanation of what act of mind takes place when the subject tries to think '*That1* glass is heavy' and '*That2* glass is heavy'. However, this explanation will be at the cost of the Unity of Content thesis.

I will conclude by remarking that the problem that has been explored here for the Object-Dependent Externalist does not seem to be as serious a problem for an externalist who is only a Kind-Dependent Externalist (KDE). Consider a KDE who holds that there are natural-kind thought contents such as 'Water is in lakes' which are kind-dependent. If there is no kind, there is no content. Suppose a subject is on Dry Earth. She thinks she has a concept associated with **(p.229)** the word 'water' but she does not: there is a systematic mirage meaning that all the taps, lakes, and rivers she takes to be filled with a stuff she

calls 'water' are in fact empty. According to the KDE it might seem to her that she thinks 'Water is in lakes' but she can she think no such thing: there is no thought available to be thought. Suppose, however, KDE allows that she can have demonstrative thoughts such as 'that stuff coming out of the tap' or 'that stuff in the lake' even when there is no stuff demonstrated.

What explanation can KDE give as to what happens in cases of content failure? What happens when it seems to our subject that she thinks 'Water is wet' but in fact thinks no such thing, there being no concept water to think? Consider again the suggestion that she rehearses a syntactic string 'water is wet' which lacks content. KDE's use of the suggestion is not problematic in the same way that ODE's use is. In the demonstrative case this explanation was not sufficient because of the possibility of distinct failed thoughts having the same syntactic structure. In the non-demonstrative case there is no such impediment to the syntactic structure being sufficient to determine both the thought, and the phenomenology of the failed thought. Further, there is no reason to take the Unity of Content thesis for kind thoughts to be in tension with the 'inner speech' suggestion. If our subject means nothing by the thought word 'water' in this context she will mean nothing by the thought word 'water' in another she is taken to. Given that there are no contexts in which her repertoire of words and concepts enables her to use 'water' contentfully (in contrast to her use of the demonstrative 'this stuff') we have no reason ascribe to her any understanding of a general content.

I conclude that when we focus on what is happening in the mind of a subject in an instance of content failure we find that the object-dependent externalist is pushed to explain what is going on. The kind-dependent seems to be in a better position.⁸

REFERENCES

Bibliography references:

Bell, D. (1988) 'Phenomenology and Egocentric Thought', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, 62: 45–60.

Evans, G. (1982) *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

McDowell, J. (1984) 'De Re Senses', in C. Wright (ed.), *Frege: Tradition and Influence* (Oxford: Blackwell).

(p.230) McGinn, C. (1982) 'The Structure of Content', in A. Woodfield (ed.), *Thought and Object* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Martin, M. G. F. (2002) 'The Transparency of Experience', *Mind and Language*, 17: 376–425.

— (2004) 'The Limits of Self-Awareness', *Philosophical Studies*, 120: 37–89.

Pryor, J. (2006) 'Hyper-reliability and Apriority', *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society*, 106: 329–46.

Sturgeon, S. (2006) 'Reflective Disjunctivism', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume*, 80: 185–216.

Notes:

(1) The unity thesis is not intended to rule out the possibility that different parts of a thought might be characterized by contents classified in some way as different types. It is rather intended to rule out the dual content theorist who holds that dual and fundamentally distinct contents could be responsible for the same parts of a thought. See McGinn 1982.

(2) Perhaps the object-dependent theorist might deny that it can even *seem* to A that she is supposing that *P*, if there is no content *P*. So they might complain that they are being asked to explain an appearance that their account does not allow for. However, the object-dependent theorist must have some way of characterizing how it is in the bad case. And the bad case just is a case of failed action in which it seems to the subject as if they did what they would have done, had they succeeded. So, I will take the locution 'it seems to A that she is supposing that *P*' as not implying that A need to be able to think *P*. To do otherwise would, it seems to me, leave us no way of conducting the discussion.

(3) David Bell's way of approaching the issue (in Bell 1988) is distinctive in asking these ontological questions, rather than the more familiar epistemological ones.

(4) McDowell himself may only have been concerned to point to a gap in the senses, and not a gap in the acts of mind.

(5) See Martin 2002, 2004. See Sturgeon 2006 for a very helpful discussion of the position.

(6) Thanks for Matt Soteriou for making this point.

(7) Adrian Haddock suggested to me that the disjunctivist may be able to make use of the metalinguistic move in the following way. As a variant of (T) we might have:

((T')) A subject who seems to think that *P* cannot know by introspective reflection that she is not thinking that *P*. For all she knows from introspective reflection the subject is able to judge that she is thinking a content expressible by 'I am thinking *P*'.

This is an interesting suggestion. It is a variant on (T) that does not leave an opening for Bell's worry about getting the phenomenology wrong as it only claims that her seeming to think it is constituted by this fact about her epistemic position. However, my suspicion is that this version of disjunctivism will suffer from the same problem we identified earlier: it does not supply the act of mind.

(8) An unwritten and much earlier version of this chapter was presented to the 'After Kant' conference in Sheffield, marking the retirement of David Bell. Many thanks to David, and the organizers, for occasioning me to go back to Bell 1988. Thanks also to the audience in Sheffield, and to one in York, for very helpful comments and questions. Thanks for very helpful comments from Adrian Haddock. Discussion with Matt Soteriou on a number of occasions, from the start, has been hugely helpful—indeed essential. Many thanks to him. Finally, my gratitude to Mark Sacks for having, this time and always, helped me work out what I was thinking by talking with him.

Access brought to you by: