

Response to Sarah Sawyer

1. Obviously Sawyer's project is welcome to me. But I have a couple of quibbles over points of detail, and a more substantial query about her novel contribution.

2. Sawyer aims to defend the Evans-McDowell view about singular thoughts against a certain objection. She formulates the Evans-McDowell view as a combination of two theses: first, that there are object-dependent contents, and second, that if a pair of speech acts, say, with that kind of content ascribe the same property to the same object, it does not follow that the two speech acts have the same content.

She represents it as an extra element in the view, over and above the second thesis as I have stated it so far, that only Fregean sense will suffice to enable us to distinguish pairs of contents related in that way. My first quibble is that I do not see this as a further claim. I think the idea of Fregean sense, as applied to the senses expressible by singular terms, just is the idea that pairs of contents related in that way may be distinct; not, as Sawyer's presentation implies, one option, perhaps among others, for enabling ourselves to make such distinctions.

3. Sawyer's target is the "Two List Argument", which purports to show that there are no object-dependent thoughts, on the ground that they are not required for the psychological explanation of behaviour. Making sense of behaviour is the very point of the conceptual apparatus that centres on the notion of thoughts. So if a supposed kind of thought never figures in the explanation of behaviour, it must be mythical.

The argument turns on imagining pairs of situations related as follows. In one member of a pair, a proponent of object-dependent thoughts will want to ascribe object-dependent thoughts to a subject. In the other member of the pair, things are, as far as the subject can tell, exactly as they are in the first situation, but the corresponding object-dependent thoughts are not ascribable, because there is no suitable object; the appearance that there is such an object is a hallucination.

In the example Sawyer works with, Ralph has a thought he would express by saying "That cat killed my canary", and he kicks at the cat he sees. Twin Ralph would express himself in the same way, and he makes exactly

matching movements with his legs. But there is no cat in his field of view; he thinks there is, but as a result of a hallucination.

Any object-dependent thoughts we might want to attribute to Ralph cannot figure in the explanation of Twin Ralph's behaviour, since Twin Ralph does not have them. Twin Ralph's thoughts, which cannot be object-dependent (at least not in the relevant respect: they cannot be dependent on the existence of the cat that is their supposed topic), suffice to account for his lashing out with his legs in the direction of the cat that he thinks he sees. Ralph's action is his lashing out with his legs in exactly that way. So according to the argument, the non-object-dependent thoughts that we are anyway required to attribute to Twin Ralph suffice for the psychological explanation of Ralph's action, and the supposed object-dependent thoughts he is credited with by the Evans-McDowell position do no explanatory work.

4. The most obvious point at which this argument is open to question is this: the argument assumes that what suffices to explain Ralph's action under a description that also applies to Twin Ralph's action — say, “trying to kick the cat that he thinks he sees” — exhausts what is needed for explaining what Ralph does.

Specifications of what someone does intentionally are themselves specifications of psychological content, the content of intentions that are getting executed. If we see the cat Ralph kicks at, we are in a position to say what he does in object-dependent terms. We can say “He is trying to kick that cat”. The perceived presence of the cat makes a contribution to the meaning of this utterance. And we cannot attribute to Twin Ralph the intention we can thus attribute to Ralph, or even an intention that matches it apart from involving a different cat. Reference to a particular cat is an essential element in our specification of the content of that intention of Ralph's. A matching reference to a particular cat is *ex hypothesi* not possible for specifying any intention of Twin Ralph's.

So there is something Ralph intentionally does and Twin Ralph does not do. There is something extra to be explained in Ralph's case. Contrary to what the Two List Argument claims, there is no bar to supposing that psychological states that Ralph does not share with Twin Ralph might have explanatory work to do.

In Noonan's version, which Sawyer discusses, it is explicit how the argument aims to exploit a certain plausible view of the identity of actions. In our example, this view of action-identity would entail that the action of Ralph's that falls under the object-dependent description we could give if we had the cat in view, “trying to kick that cat”, is the very same action that falls under the non-object-dependent description, “trying to kick the cat that he thinks he sees”. The second description fits Twin Ralph's action too. As before, Twin Ralph's non-object-dependent psychological states suffice to ex-

plain his action. So they suffice to explain Ralph's action under the non-object-dependent description that fits it too.

But we can grant all that, and insist that it constitutes no argument for supposing that those non-object-dependent psychological states suffice to explain *what Ralph does*. What we are granting, if we grant all that, is that those non-object-dependent psychological states suffice to explain Ralph's action under one of its descriptions. But that is not to grant that they suffice to explain his action — the identical event, if you like — under another of its descriptions. It is a familiar point that the same event can call for different explanations depending on how it is specified. What is needed, in order to explain what Ralph does, depends on what we say Ralph does when we ask for an explanation — that is, on how we describe Ralph's action when we pose the explanatory task. It does not make any difference to this if all the descriptions we might use in order to pose an explanatory task concerning Ralph's action are descriptions of a single event. The explanatory tasks are still different.

5. The considerations I have just rehearsed, at greater length than Sawyer does, undermine what she identifies as the first of two assumptions on which the Two List Argument depends, the assumption that Ralph and his twin perform the same actions. She credits showing what is wrong with the assumption to Burge, but the point is already in Evans.¹

Sawyer puts the point in terms of what would be required for Ralph and his twin to be subsumed by the same psychological laws. My second quibble is that it is tendentious to suppose that the psychological explanation that constitutes the very point of psychological concepts works by subsuming explananda under laws. In fact I think proper attention to the real-life use of those concepts leaves this thought looking quite implausible. Rejecting the Two List Argument has no need of it. I made no use of it in my sketch of the considerations that undermine the first assumption.

6. Sawyer's novelty is an attack on the second of the two assumptions she finds in the Two List Argument: the assumption that Ralph shares the psychological states that figure in the explanation of Twin Ralph's action.

It is common ground that psychological properties supervene on non-psychologically specifiable properties. Sawyer undermines an inference to the assumption she attacks, from the premise that Ralph is *ex hypothesi* a duplicate of Twin Ralph in all non-psychologically describable respects compatible with the difference between their situations that the argument turns on. The conclusion does not follow, because the subvenience base for a supervenient property can include absences. Sawyer suggests that the subvenience base for Twin Ralph's relevant psychological states includes the absence of the cat. If that is right, a supervenience thesis yields no ground for supposing those psychological states are shared by Ralph.

Sawyer's positive point here, that subvenience bases can include absences, seems unquestionable. I think her example, about the subvenience base for the property of being pure corundum, establishes it beyond doubt.

But I do not find it clear that the point tells against the Two List Argument. That subvenience bases *can* include absences is not by itself a reason for supposing that the subvenience base for the psychological states of Twin Ralph that the Two List Argument appeals to includes an absence. And in fact that does not seem plausible.

What accounts for Twin Ralph's behaviour is, for instance, his belief that the cat that killed his canary is at a certain position in his field of view. The subvenience base for a belief with that content should consist in facts that *leave it open* whether or not there is a cat in the believer's field of view, not facts that include there not being a cat in the believer's point of view. The subvenience base for a belief should not include something such that, if the believer knew it, that would destroy the appearance that it is rational for him to believe what he does. So nothing that entails that a belief is false should figure in its subvenience base. This principle seems reasonable. And it implies that the subvenience base for that belief of Twin Ralph's does not include the absence of a cat. So there is no problem in supposing that Ralph is like Twin Ralph in believing that the cat that killed his canary is at a certain position in his visual field.

Of course this is not a defence of the Two List Argument. As Sawyer would acknowledge, the wrongness of the first assumption is enough to display it as unconvincing anyway. But I am not persuaded that she has, as she claims, found a different way to refute the argument.

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NOTE

¹ See *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 203-4.