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Russellian Thoughts

PETER CARRUTHERS

It has become fashionable of late to claim that most, if not all, singular thoughts are Russellian—that is to say, that in case of the non-existence of the object of a putative singular thought, there is no thought. I shall consider the main arguments for this view presented by Gareth Evans in his justly celebrated book *The Varieties of Reference*.[1] I shall urge that none is successful, and that there are, on the contrary, powerful counter-considerations.

Throughout I shall restrict the discussion to singular thoughts, rather than singular statements. This is partly in order to follow Evans' own procedure; but also because the issues connected with thoughts and thinking are much more sharply focused. (It should not, however, be taken as an endorsement of Evans' view that thought is prior to language.) For ease of exposition I shall further restrict attention to the special case of demonstrative thoughts, though the points raised should apply to all singular thinking.

(A) *Against Cartesian and Russellian thinking*

Evans charges opponents of the Russellian status of singular thoughts with Cartesianism—that is, with the view that we have incorrigible access to our own states of consciousness.[2] On the Cartesian account, if I take myself to be thinking a singular thought then so I am, irrespective of whatever else may be true of the world; and in particular, irrespective of whether or not that thought concerns any existing object. It is therefore important to declare at the outset that I am equally opposed to Cartesianism.[3] In my view thoughts depend, for their existence, upon various non-conscious capacities, such as the capacity to classify things in a regular way over time, or the capacity to locate objects in space. It is therefore possible for someone to take themself[4] to be thinking a thought of a certain kind when, lacking the appropriate capacities, they are, in fact, thinking nothing at all.

[1] Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, ed. John McDowell, Oxford, 1982. Hereafter cited as *VOR*. In fact, I do not attempt to reply to all of Evans' arguments, some of which have been successfully dealt with by Simon Blackburn in *Spreading the Word*, Oxford, 1984, 9.3-4.

[2] *VOR*, pp. 199-203.

[3] I am not the only one to try to steer a middle course between rejection of Russellianism and endorsement of Cartesianism. See Simon Blackburn, *ibid.* p. 324, and 'Finding Psychology', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1986, pp. 111-222. See also Harold Noonan, 'Russellian thoughts and methodological solipsism' in *Language, Mind & Logic*, ed. J. Butterfield, CUP, 1986, pp. 67-90.

[4] Throughout I use the colloquial plural pronouns in place of the ubiquitous, and pernicious, masculine singular required by strict grammar.

For example, imagine that scientists have invented a drug which has selective effects upon language use: it randomizes a subject's use of the colour terms, while leaving them with the impression that everything is in order. Someone under the influence of this drug will apply the term 'red' now to grass, now to the sky, now to a sandy beach; all with the same feeling of obviousness and familiarity that you or I would experience on describing a ripe tomato as 'red'. But it has this effect not by interfering with the subject's eyesight, but by randomizing their sense of which shades of colour belong with which. In such a case a subject who does not know that they have taken the drug may believe themselves to be thinking a thought of a certain kind—which might, for example, be expressed in the words 'This grass is bright red'—when in fact, lacking the requisite capacity to classify colours in a regular way, they are not.

My opposition to Russellian thoughts is founded, not on Cartesianism, but on the role of thought in the causation and explanation of human action. Someone who takes themself to be perceiving a butterfly (which is in fact an hallucination) may think 'I must have that one for my collection', and rush off to collect their butterfly-net. How are we to explain their behaviour on the (Russellian) assumption that they failed to think a thought at all? How can a non-thought cause, and provide the rationale for, an intentional action? For although there will have been various descriptive thoughts available to the agent (such as that they want a butterfly of such-and-such a type for their collection, and that there is a butterfly of that type on the wall in front of them), Evans rightly insists that the agent need not actually have entertained any such thought.

The point here needs stating with some care. For those descriptive thoughts, while not being attributable to the agent as (occurrent) acts of thinking, may nevertheless be attributable as (dispositional) beliefs and desires. An agent will, of course, generally have many beliefs and desires that are not present to consciousness at the time, but that may still play a role in determining and explaining behaviour. Beliefs and desires are dispositions, not conscious acts. So it may well be that we can explain the person's action in a case like that above, as well as providing it with its intentional object, by saying that they wanted a butterfly of a certain sort for their collection, and came to believe that there was one of that sort on the wall in front of them. But notice that, for the Russellian, the action proceeded from these states without any conscious decision. For the only candidate for the status of such a decision—the subject thinking 'I must have that one for my collection'—is claimed to be without content. In consequence, the Russellian will apparently have to assimilate such actions to cases of routine activity—like turning the wheel of my car while driving—which may indeed be intentional, but which are not undertaken as a result of any conscious decision. (I may have been thinking about something else at the time.) Yet this seems to be a complete distortion of the facts of the case.

In response to this argument the Russellian might draw a distinction between a thought and a thought-sign (a thought being a thought-sign that has content). And it might be said that a thought-sign, although contentless, can figure in a conscious event having a causal role very similar to that of a decision. Thus the protagonists in Lewis Carroll's poem may have 'decided' to go hunting the snark before they set off on their voyage. Although they surely failed to think any contentful thought, their action is quite unlike a case of merely routine non-self-conscious activity. On the contrary, it is caused by a conscious event involving a complete thought-sign, just as the action of a person setting out to try a new restaurant for lunch may be caused by such an event. ('I know, I shall try Pepita's.') The difference is only that in the one case the thought-sign expresses a content and in the other not. Similarly then, it might be said that the action of the person setting out to fetch their butterfly-net is caused by conscious awareness of an event involving a particular thought-sign—namely, 'I must have that one'—which, since the butterfly in question is merely an hallucination, fails to express a complete thought-content.

But what this response ignores is the extent to which the actions of the butterfly-hunter (but not the snark-hunter) may be given a coherence and unity deriving from the original decision. Each stage—fetching their net, returning to the room, searching the walls and surfaces, then running outside when the initial search fails to reveal a butterfly—may be rendered intelligible by further thoughts referring back to the original: 'I must hurry before it flies off', 'It seems to have moved, but it is probably on another surface in the room', 'It doesn't seem to be here, but it can't have got far, so it is worth looking outside'. Moreover, both we as observers and the person themself would have no difficulty in specifying the circumstances under which the project would have ended in success, namely, that there had indeed been a valuable butterfly observed on the wall, and that that very butterfly was captured undamaged for the butterfly-hunter's collection.

Contrast with this the sequence of actions of the snark-hunter, which can only seem to us to be insane. Whereas the later thoughts of the butterfly-hunter relate back to their original decision in the normal way (in exactly the way that they would have done had there been a real butterfly there), the later thoughts of the snark-hunter will apparently appear out of nowhere, without any coherent rationale: 'Perhaps there is a snark on the other side of the island', 'Behind trees and stones would be a good place to look', and so on. Moreover, neither we nor the person themself would have any idea of the conditions under which the project would end in success. Indeed, they have only to reflect for a moment to realize that they have not the faintest idea why they should look in one place rather than another, nor indeed of what they are looking for. This is why Carroll's poem is so funny: for it is unintelligible how any sane individual could get any further into such a 'project' than the very first step, before realizing that something was seriously amiss.

Our argument against the Russellian has survived the response unscathed. The thoughts of a person setting out to capture an hallucinatory butterfly may enter into the causation of their action—guiding and regulating and providing intelligibility—in precisely the way that any ordinary contentful thought would. To insist, as the Russellian does, that these are in fact mere thought-signs lacking in content, is to commit us to giving two quite different explanations in the two cases, and this seems entirely wrong. On the contrary, the explanations are the same, whether the butterfly be real or hallucinatory.

Note once again that this argument against Russellianism is not based upon the belief that we have incorrigible access to our own acts of thinking, but rather on the much more specific claim that the Russellian will be forced to classify together actions whose explanations are psychologically quite distinct. The person setting out to capture an hallucinatory butterfly deserves to be classified together with the person setting out to try a new restaurant for lunch—as performing an action as a result of a conscious decision—rather than together with the driver who turns the wheel to avoid a parked car while their conscious thoughts are directed to something quite different, or together with the Bellman setting out to capture a snark.[5]

Having distanced myself from the Cartesian conception of thinking, and having outlined what I take to be the main argument against the Russellian conception of singular thought, I shall turn now to consider the arguments that can be given in support of Russellianism.

(B) *Describing the content of thoughts*

Evans has a number of arguments for the Russellian status of singular thoughts. But the main one would appear to be this: that in a case where there is no existent object of thought, there is no way of stating the content of the putative singular thought.[6] Then on the assumption that a thought whose content cannot be expressed in fact has no content, it will follow that in a case of this sort no thought really occurs. For a thought without a content is no thought at all.

Consider, then, a case of the sort sketched above: hallucinating the presence of a butterfly on the wall someone thinks 'That one is worth having'. What is the supposed content of their thought? Can we describe which thought it is that they supposedly succeed in thinking? Clearly we cannot say 'They thought that that butterfly is worth having', for since there is in fact no butterfly, this would merely invite the response 'And which

[5] The person under the influence of the use-randomizing drug, on the other hand, has to be classified together with the Bellman. For their 'decision' to place all the 'red' books together on a shelf can lead to no intelligible sequence of actions. (Remember, their sense of which shades should be classified as 'red' will shift randomly as they go along.)

[6] Evans' writing is very dense, but this argument is closest to the surface at *VOR*, pp. 82, 139–40, 170, 173.

butterfly is *that*?' Nor, Evans argues, can the content of the thought be characterized in purely descriptive terms. The person's thought is not that the butterfly which is causing their current experiences is worth having, nor that the butterfly occupying such-and-such a position on a wall is worth having. Although these are perfectly respectable, thinkable thoughts, they are not what the person thought when they entertained the thought-sign 'That one is worth having'. The thought attempted was demonstrative not descriptive, and Evans argues that the content of such thoughts cannot be adequately expressed in descriptive terms.

The first of these points may be granted as obvious. If the butterfly is merely an hallucination, then clearly we cannot describe the content of the thought by means of a that-clause demonstratively indicating a particular butterfly. But what of the second point? What shows that the subject was not in reality thinking that the butterfly in such-and-such a position on a wall is worth having (a content which is available to be thought whether the butterfly be real or hallucinatory)? It is here that Evans deploys what he calls 'The Intuitive Criterion of Difference', which he derives from Frege. This is the principle that thoughts are distinct (have different contents) if and only if it is possible for a subject to take differing epistemic attitudes to them at the same time—for example, by believing the one while doubting the truth of the other.[7] Now clearly it is possible for someone to believe that a particular demonstratively indicated butterfly is worth having, while remaining doubtful about whether the butterfly on the wall of their office (for example) is worth having, as they may not know that they are currently in their office. So by the intuitive criterion these must be thoughts with different contents.

However, it is not so easy to employ the Intuitive Criterion to show that the content of a demonstrative thought cannot be captured by means of some description such as 'The butterfly which is the cause of my experiences is worth having'. (Or better: 'The butterfly which is the cause of *these* experiences', since I may be perceiving two butterflies but only thinking demonstratively about one of them.)[8] For we appear to have very strong intuitions that the existence of appropriate causal, or informational, links plays a crucial role in determining the objects of our thought. Thus Evans argues at some length that our singular thoughts cannot concern objects with which they are not informationally linked.[9]

[7] Notice that to endorse the Intuitive Criterion is not to claim that persons have incorrigible awareness of identities and differences between thoughts. For the criterion is that thoughts are distinct if it is *possible* for a thinker to take differing epistemic attitudes to them. A thinker might mistakenly deny that such a thing is possible when presented with two thought-tokens, overlooking some imaginable circumstance which would in fact induce them to take differing attitudes.

[8] This analysis has been proposed by John Searle in *Intentionality*, CUP, 1983, ch. 8. Blackburn gives a similar analysis (*Spreading the Word*, p. 315), which seems to amount to this: the subject is thinking that the thing which is in fact the determinant of their mode of presentation is worth having (where the role of the 'in fact' is to index the reference of the description to the actual world).

[9] *VOR*, ch. 5. Evans uses this as a platform from which to develop yet another argument for the Russellian status of singular thoughts, thus: (1) The existence of an information link to an appropriate

In reply, it might be claimed that someone could, through either muddle or philosophical conviction, believe a particular demonstratively indicated butterfly to be worth having, while doubting or remaining agnostic about whether the butterfly which is the cause of their current experiences is worth having. For example, if we were to put our proposed description to ordinary people in the street, who have just acquired the corresponding demonstrative beliefs, it is doubtful whether in every case they would immediately concur. And, of course, not all philosophers accept the causal theory of perception.

Although this line of reply is an attractive one, there are dangers in placing too great a reliance on it. For if muddle (which may involve a temporary failure to understand one of the propositions put forward) and philosophical conviction (which may involve second-order theses about those propositions themselves) are allowed to effect the application of the Intuitive Criterion, then it is doubtful whether any syntactically distinct sentences will count as expressing the same thought. For example, if we were to conduct a survey asking people who believe that Brutus killed Caesar whether they also believe that Caesar was killed by Brutus, I am sure that some of them would become sufficiently confused to express scepticism or outright disbelief. And I can imagine a philosopher becoming convinced that some special significance attaches to the use of the active voice. Perhaps they might believe that the active, but not the passive, carries an implication of intentionality, and so might believe that Caesar was killed by Brutus, but (when doing philosophy) claim to be agnostic about whether Brutus killed Caesar. Yet on any account these simple active/passive transformations represent the very paradigm of identity of thought expressed.

Perhaps a better line of reply is simply to point to the intuitive implausibility of the proposal. For normally when I think 'That butterfly is worth having', I am not paying any attention to my experiences. Rather, my experiences are, as it were, transparent: they are like a medium through which I see, but which itself remains unnoticed. So when I entertain a demonstrative thought, I am not normally thinking about my experiences at all. For I surely could not be thinking about my experience of the butterfly without paying any attention to it. And if I am not thinking about my experiences, then my thought cannot have the same content as the thought 'The butterfly which is causing these experiences is worth having'. For thoughts that are about different things (that have different objects)

object is necessary for the *truth* of a singular thought. (2) But the description of such a link forms no part of the *content* of the thought. (3) So the existence of an information link to an object is necessary to the very existence of a singular thought. (See *VOR*, pp. 133–5, 139.) But this argument is obviously invalid. For the description of the information link may fail to be part of the content of a singular thought (by the intuitive criterion), and yet nevertheless be *implied by* it. (It is a familiar fact that deductive argument can yield surprising conclusions.) Then, in the absence of an information link to an object, the thought would still exist, but be false.

will differ in content on any account (at least if they are entertained by the same person at the same time. See section (E) below.)

We have endorsed Evans' view that demonstrative thoughts must differ in content from descriptive thoughts, even thoughts about the causes of the subject's current experiences. However, it may be worth canvassing briefly one further argument for the same conclusion. This is based on the claim, which would be endorsed by many philosophers (including Evans), that thoughts about physical particulars are logically prior to thoughts about experiences. Many believe that a subject's thoughts about, and identifications of, their own experiences are only possible if they are already capable of thinking about and referring to physical objects in space outside themselves. If this is so, and if, as is plausible, demonstrative thoughts are the most basic kind of thought about physical particulars, then there can be no question of demonstrative thoughts having the same content as thoughts involving reference to experiences. For how could the one thought-content be logically prior to the other if they are, on the contrary, the very same content?

So far, so good. In the case of an attempted demonstrative thought whose object fails to exist, we cannot present the content of the thought essayed by means of another demonstrative thought (assuming that the hallucination is not collective), nor as being the same as the content of any descriptive thought. But why should it follow from this that the content of the thought cannot be stated at all? Why, in particular, is it assumed that a statement of the content of a thought must always present it in the form of a simple that-clause? Why should it not be said: 'The content of the subject's thought is the very same as it would have been had there been a real butterfly on the wall causing their experiences, and had they thought that that butterfly was worth having'?[10]

The suppressed premiss underlying Evans' position is that a description of the content of a thought has, as it were, to describe it from the inside, exhibiting by means of a that-clause a thinkable thought as the content of the thought in question. I shall consider shortly what might make this

[10] The approach taken here should be distinguished from that of Jerry Fodor in 'Individualism and Supervenience', *Aristotelian Society Proceedings*, Suppl., 1986, pp. 235–62, who attempts to overcome the problem of expressibility by *mentioning* a sentence (p. 259). This is implausible, if only because someone could entertain a thought-sign without thinking any thought at all.

An exactly parallel approach may be taken to Evans' argument from capacities, which recurs throughout his book (see for example, *VOR*, pp. 284–5.) Having claimed that many singular thoughts presuppose a capacity of some sort to identify the object in question, he then asks how there can be a capacity to identify an object which does not exist. For example, if my recognition-based thought 'That man was unpleasant' presupposes a capacity to recognize and identify the man in question, then how could such a capacity—or such a thought—exist in the case where the original episode was some sort of hallucination? In reply, we can reject the assumption that a description of a capacity must take the form 'It is the capacity to identify (recognize, locate, etc.) X'. Rather we can say this: the thinker possesses the very same capacity as the one they would have possessed had there been a real person who caused their experiences on such-and-such an occasion. (Noonan, Op. Cit., responds to the argument from capacities in similar manner.)

assumption seem plausible. But notice that the approach indicated above is an entirely natural one to take, given our argument that the content of the thought is the same, whether the experience be real or hallucinatory. For we can then appeal to this fact in order to describe the content of the subject's thought in the hallucinatory case, saying that their thought is the very same as it would have been had their experience not been an hallucination.

Yet if the content is the same in the two cases, and if we can, in the normal case, describe that content by means of a demonstrative that-clause, how is it that we cannot give such a description in the case where the experience is hallucinatory? The answer to this is that some thoughts are only possible for those who have the appropriate beliefs. In the case of demonstrative thoughts, these can only be entertained by someone who currently has perceptually based beliefs. Only someone who takes themself to be perceiving a real butterfly can seriously entertain the thought 'That butterfly is worth having'. So in a case where the thinker's experience is hallucinatory, and is believed by us to be such, we have no alternative but to describe their thought indirectly, saying that it is just as it would have been had their experience been veridical.

It is, however, a consequence of my position that in a case of collective hallucination (or where the butterfly is some sort of mirage, or perhaps a hologram) the subject's thought *can* be correctly described using a demonstrative that-clause. If we all take ourselves (wrongly) to be perceiving a butterfly on the wall, then we might naturally describe the thought which one of us entertains by saying 'It is the thought that that butterfly is worth having'. And on my view, such a description would have to be correct, for the that-clause expresses a content that is supposed to be available to be thought whether or not there is a real butterfly there. But I take this to be a positive virtue of the account. For when I imagine myself in such a situation, and imagine later discovering that the butterfly was not real, I do not feel inclined to say that the subject's thought had been misdescribed to me. On the contrary, I was told its content precisely.

Note that my position is not reductive. I am not arguing that demonstrative thinking can be analysed away, or replaced by some other form of thought. All I have done is to provide a mode of description of the content of demonstrative thoughts which renders those contents available to a thinker whether or not the objects of the thoughts exist. Thus:

> The content of a demonstrative thought of a butterfly is the very same in any world in which the subject's beliefs and experiences remain the same, but/and in which there is a real butterfly causing the perceptions on which the thought is based, and in which the subject thinks that that butterfly is such-and-such.

Since this account contains within it a (hypothetical) demonstrative that-clause, it is not reductive: it could only be understood by someone who already understands, and is capable of thinking, demonstrative thoughts.

(C) *Explanation vs. communication*

Why is it that in giving descriptions of someone's thought we characteristically use a simple that-clause? Is there any reason why we should not be happy with the sort of indirect, object-independent description given above? One consideration here is brevity. Since in most cases where someone essays a demonstrative thought there will exist an object thought about, a demonstrative that-clause will normally be available to specify the content of their thought.[11] And such a description is much more economical. But this cannot by itself explain the feeling, which many people share, that something essential would be missing from any description which—like the one given above—failed to specify which thing was the object thought about.

A much more important consideration is that there are, I shall argue, two very different kinds of interest that we can take in descriptions of thought-content, which I shall refer to as 'the explanatory' and 'the communicative' (or 'belief-acquisitive') interests respectively. From the perspective represented by our interest in communication, it is knowledge of which object the thought concerns that is crucial. Yet I shall argue that it is not this perspective, but rather the explanatory one, which is conceptually tied to the notion of thought-content. So failure to distinguish between the two perspectives may easily lead to the view that demonstrative thought-contents have to be described by means of that-clauses which specify the objects thought about.

One kind of interest in thoughts and descriptions of thoughts lies in the explanation of action. It is this interest that is conceptually connected with the notion of thought-content, at least if the latter is understood as being governed by the Intuitive Criterion of Difference. For this principle gives us a notion of thought-content that divides up thoughts in precisely the way that we need, if the notion of content is to subserve explanations of fine differences in people's behaviour. (For example, someone might assent to one of two logically equivalent sentences while denying the other, yet without giving any sign of misunderstanding either of them. Without the Intuitive Criterion we should have to represent such a person as taking contradictory attitudes to one and the same thought-content.) Moreover, from this explanatory standpoint we should be indifferent as to whether the

[11] This is not to say that such a clause will by itself always be sufficient. Where the thought-episode is in the past, or the thinker out of sight, we may also have to specify their relation to the object. For example: 'Mary, with that butterfly fluttering around her head, thought that it would be worth having'. See section (G) below.

subject's thought concerns any existing object. As has already been argued in section (A) above, the explanations will be the same whether the subject's experiences are veridical or hallucinatory. So from this standpoint we should seek to describe thought-contents in such a way that they will still be available to be thought in the absence of their objects.[12]

The other kind of interest which we take in descriptions of thoughts, however, is basically communicative, being much closer to the kind of interest that we take in the statements of others. Often reports of the thoughts of other people will play a role in our lives similar to reports of their overt assertions: providing us with reason to make additions to, or subtractions from, our own stock of beliefs. For example, if Mary is a well-known butterfly-collector, and you tell me 'Mary thought that that butterfly would be worth having', then you have given me reason for thinking, myself, that the butterfly in question is valuable. It is from this (communicative, belief-acquisitive) perspective that descriptions of thoughts should convey the information of the identities of their objects; it will generally be crucial to get across in your description which object the person's thought was about. For example, if you had only told me 'Mary had a demonstrative thought whose content concerned a butterfly in front of her, to the effect that that butterfly would be worth having', then this would have failed to get across to me which butterfly I should now attempt to capture.

Note that, in contrast with the explanatory standpoint, the communicative interest in thoughts is not conceptually connected to a notion of thought-content governed by the Intuitive Criterion of Difference. From this perspective there is no requirement that a thought-description should respect the manner in which the person themself entertained their thought. All that matters is that the description should get across which object that thought concerned. (It is descriptions of thoughts from this perspective which are *de re*.) From the point of view of successful communication (which subserves the acquisition of new beliefs) it would not have mattered in the least had you chosen to describe Mary's thought by saying 'She thought that the butterfly which is in front of you now would be worth having', despite the fact that Mary herself entertained no such thought (by the Intuitive Criterion). For I would still have known which butterfly I should try to capture.

Other writers have noted the different kinds of interest that we take in attributions of thought-content, and the different criteria for thought-identity appropriate to those interests.[13] But they have drawn the conclusion that our ordinary (folk-psychological) notion of thought-content is a hybrid, containing rather different aspects that may be to some degree in tension

[12] Evans does have a further argument here, concerning explanations of actions on individuals. See section (F) below.

[13] For example, Colin McGinn, 'The Structure of Content', in *Thought and Object*, ed. A. Woodfield, Oxford, 1982, pp. 205–58; and Jerry Fodor, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

with one another. I do not know how these writers can be so confident that we employ one (hybrid) notion of content, rather than two distinct notions. For an equally plausible account of the linguistic phenomena (of our intuitions, of the things we are inclined to say) would be that we employ two distinct notions of content, one when our main interest is in psychological explanation, the other when our main interest is communicative (or belief-acquisitive). But in fact this issue—concerning the notions of content which we actually employ—does not matter very much. For once we have seen that there are two quite distinct perspectives we can take on the matter, to which two distinct notions of thought-content are appropriate, then what we ought to do henceforward is work with two distinct notions (whether or not we currently do so).[14]

If it is insisted that we either do or should work with a single univocal notion of content, then we can, in fact, meet this requirement, while doing justice to the demands of the different perspectives, by writing a reference to them into the concept itself. Thus we might say that an ascription of thought-content is correct if and only if it tells us enough about the subject's state of mind for the purposes in hand. Then, when the purpose in hand is that of giving a psychological explanation, the thought-description will have to respect the Intuitive Criterion of Difference. And we shall want to be given the same thought-description whether or not the object of the thought really exists. But when the purpose in hand is belief-acquisitive, we shall no longer be restricted by the Intuitive Criterion, so long as the thought-description conveys which object the thought concerns. And if the thought in fact has no object (if the thinker is hallucinating) then *no* description of their state of mind can be relevant to the acquisition of reasonable beliefs about the world.[15]

(D) *Two kinds of methodological solipsism*

In claiming that the content of a demonstrative thought can be characterized without reference to the actual object of that thought, I have no doubt opened myself to the charge of being a methodological solipsist: of wanting to describe the contents of the mind without referring to any objects or states

[14] For an elaboration and defence of the mode of argument deployed here, see my 'Conceptual Pragmatism' forthcoming in *Synthese*. (In that paper I draw a rather different distinction between kinds of interest in beliefs from the one drawn here, but which is not relevant to discussions of belief-content.)

[15] This, I believe, gives us the answer to Blackburn's question, as to the nature of the theoretical need which is supposed to motivate the introduction of a notion of Russellian thought ('Finding Psychology', p. 120). In my view, that need is not theoretical (in the sense of 'explanatory'), but rather derives from our interest in acquiring reasonable beliefs on the basis of reports of the thoughts of others.

Incidentally, my position should be distinguished from what Blackburn calls 'Universalism', at least if 'universal' contrasts with 'singular' which in turn contrasts with 'descriptive'. For, to repeat, my position is that demonstrative thoughts are genuinely singular, in that their content is not equivalent (by the Intuitive Criterion) to the content of any descriptive thought (whether indexed to the actual world or not). But I deny that such thoughts are Russellian.

in the physical world. And it is pretty universally agreed that this is a bad thing to be. However, we can, I think, distinguish two distinct versions of methodological solipsism, between which Putnam's original introduction of the doctrine equivocated.[16] One of these ('strong m.s.') is closely allied to a Cartesian view of the mental, but the other ('weak m.s.') is entirely free of such associations. Failure to notice this distinction may have led many to embrace a Russellian view of thinking—believing this to be required of them by their rejection of Cartesianism—on entirely inadequate grounds. It may also have led to the debate over the Russellian status of singular thoughts seeming to have much wider significance than it really has.

Strong m.s. would claim that an adequate account of all thought-contents (and indeed all mental states generally) can and should be given without reference to any facts about the physical world, including facts about the subject's own body. So according to strong m.s., mental states exactly like ours could exist, not just in a disembodied mind, but also in a mind which never *had* been embodied. This strong claim is very likely false, for a whole variety of reasons. For example, Evans is very likely correct that an adequate account of demonstrative thinking would have to include an account of the underlying capacities to find one's way around an objective spatial world, and to keep track of objects within that world.[17] It may thus be that an adequate account of demonstrative thought would have to position the subject very firmly within a physical framework, perhaps a framework possessing various further structural features, such as relative stability in the locations of its elements. Moreover anyone who, like myself, is inclined to endorse some version of functionalist account of mental states must reject strong m.s.[18] For the normal causes and effects which define the different sorts of mental state will very often be physical ones.

Weak m.s., on the other hand, is merely the claim defended in this paper: that it is possible to describe the content of any given singular thought, expressing that which makes this singular thought distinct from other thoughts of the same type, without referring to any individual physical object. It is entirely compatible with this claim that singular thinking in general should require the existence of appropriate objects of thought—that singular thought about physical objects should only be possible for a thinker who inhabits a world peopled by such objects. Indeed, weak m.s. makes a claim no stronger than the rejection of the Russellian status of singular thoughts. It is equivalent to the denial of the claim that mere non-existence (in any particular case) of the object of a singular thought can be sufficient to deprive that thought of content.

[16] See Hilary Putnam, 'The Meaning of "Meaning"' in *Mind, Language and Reality*, CUP, 1975, pp. 215–75. A similar distinction is drawn by Blackburn in 'Finding Psychology'. See also the somewhat different distinction between methodological individualism and methodological solipsism drawn by Fodor, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

[17] See *VOR*, ch. 6.

[18] See my *Introducing Persons: theories and arguments in the philosophy of mind*, Croom Helm and SUNY, 1986, chs. 4 and 6. iv.

(E) *Doppelgänger thoughts*

No doubt it will also be objected that on the account of singular thought-content being defended here, it will be possible for there to be two thoughts (thought-tokens) with the same content which nevertheless concern different objects. For example, both I and my Twin-Earth double may think 'That butterfly is worth having' in exactly similar circumstances. Since our circumstances are exactly similar, and since we are in type-identical mental states (where those state are described 'narrowly', without reference to any particular physical objects), then we are, on the anti-Russellian account sketched above, thinking thoughts with the very same content.[19] Each of us is thinking a thought with the very same content as we should be thinking in any case where we have such-and-such beliefs, in which there is a real butterfly causing such-and-such experiences upon which our thought is based (where the fillings-in for 'such-and-such' are in each of our cases the same), and in which we think that that butterfly is worth having. Yet for all that, we should be thinking about different butterflies.

There is a strong temptation here to insist that since we should be thinking about different things, our thought-contents must also be different. It might be possible, for example, that the one thought should be true while the other was false. (Suppose that the two worlds differ only in this: that I believe falsely, whereas my doppelgänger believes truly, that butterflies of that type are much prized by collectors.) Yet how can two tokens of the very same thought-content, at the same time in the same possible world, differ in truth value? Does this not run straight up against the principle of non-contradiction? So it might seem that we have no option but to write a reference to the individual butterflies into the content of the two thought-tokens, thus making them thoughts of different types. The thoughts would then be (partly) not in the head, and it would follow that they are Russellian: in the absence of the object of the thought, there could exist no thought of that type.

I believe this line of argument should be resisted. We should, on the contrary, embrace the apparently unpalatable conclusion that two tokens of the same thought-content can—when entertained by different thinkers—concern two distinct objects. We should accept that two thought-tokens may share the very same content while differing in truth conditions. So it is thought-tokens, rather than thought-types (-contents), which are the proper bearers of truth values. And it is thought-tokens to which the principle of non-contradiction applies. However, we obviously do need to do something to render this position palatable. We need to defuse, or explain away, the

[19] Evans, in his discussion of Twin-Earth examples, *VOR*, pp. 200–4, insists that such thoughts would be mere *thought-schemata*. But this is to beg the question, namely, must a complete thought-content determine a unique set of truth conditions? See the discussion which follows and Fodor, *op. cit.*, pp. 255–7.

temptation to believe that thoughts which concern different objects must also differ in content.

Part of the explanation may again be a failure to distinguish between the explanatory and belief-acquisitive standpoints. For from the latter standpoint what matters are the truth-conditions of thoughts. If my interest in someone's thought is that I may, in the light of what they think, modify my own beliefs about the world, then what I need to know about their thought is its truth conditions: I need to know what states in the world would render it true or false. I do not need to know the precise manner in which they themselves represent those states. So from this standpoint, a description of a thought that does not uniquely convey its truth conditions cannot possibly be adequate. But from the explanatory standpoint, on the other hand, the truth conditions are of no consequence. What matters is the precise manner in which the subject themself represents those truth conditions. Then from the belief-acquisitive standpoint, I and my doppelgänger think different thoughts (they have different truth conditions); but from the explanatory standpoint they are the very same thought (the mode of representation is the same).

This is, however, only part of the explanation. There is also the existence of a long and influential tradition according to which thought-content determines thought-object (and truth conditions generally). On this tradition a thought comes to represent a particular object (or a particular set of truth conditions) in virtue of having the content that it does. So it is supposed to be possible for any given object to be represented by more than one thought (there are many possible modes of thinking about that butterfly), but it is supposed to be *im*possible for one and the same thought to represent more than one object. On this view, content determines, but is not determined by, object. In which case, there ought to be no room for the idea that I and my doppelgänger may entertain the very same thought but be thinking about different things.

Here we need to recall what was said in section (A) above about the way in which thoughts depend upon various non-conscious skills and capacities. Thus the thought 'Ripe tomatoes are red' is only possible for a thinker who is capable of classifying shades of colour in a genuinely orderly way. It is this capacity that constitutes the 'mode of projection' of that thought-content onto reality, making it true that the term 'red', for that thinker, designates the determinate class of shades that it does. It is in virtue of this capacity being as it is that the truth conditions of the thought are as they are: had the subject been disposed to employ the term 'red' differently, then that thought might—while remaining subjectively indistinguishable from at present—have had different truth conditions.

Something similar is also true in the case of singular thoughts. As Evans himself emphasizes, it is in virtue of the thinker's capacity to find their way round an objective spatial world, and to locate perceived objects within that

world, that a particular singular thought-token comes to concern the object that it does.[20] It is this capacity that constitutes the projection of a purely subjective thought-content onto a determinate individual. It will then be possible—as in the case of I and my doppelgänger—that different tokens of the very same thought-content should, purely in virtue of the different spatial locations of their thinkers, be projected onto distinct objects.

What is really wrong with the argument from doppelgänger thoughts is the suppressed assumption that if the content of thought determines the object thought about, then it must be possible to 'read off' knowledge of the object from knowledge of the content of the thought alone. Whereas in truth: if God had looked into our minds he would not have been able to see there what we were thinking of. For nothing in the mind is intrinsically representational: thoughts only have relation to reality via the various non-conscious skills and capacities of the thinking subject. So in order to know the object of someone's thought, it will not be enough, in general, to know its content. Only by 'following through' the mode of projection of that thought will you be led to a determinate object. Hence in order to know the object of a demonstrative thought, you will need also to know the objective spatial location of the thinker.

The argument from doppelgänger thoughts, then, is powerless to lend any support to the Russellian conception. At most it forces us to recognize that different tokens of the very same thought-content can have different truth conditions, and hence that it is thought-tokens rather than thought-types which are the proper bearers of truth values. But this is something which we ought to have been prepared to accept in any case. For the relationships between our thoughts and their truth conditions are not intrinsic, nor laid up in some platonic heaven, but are determined by the capacities and dispositions of thinkers. We should be prepared to accept that although thought-content does indeed determine truth conditions, the 'determination' involved is much closer to being causal than logical.[21] It will then be possible that two thinkers of the very same thought should, purely in virtue of their different capacities, or their different spatial locations, think thoughts with differing truth conditions. Thus what makes it true that mine and my doppelgänger's thoughts concern different butterflies (and hence have different truth conditions), is that if we were asked to capture them (for example), we should in the normal course of events finish up with different butterflies in our nets.

[20] *VOR*, ch. 6.

[21] It is sometimes said that these Twin-Earth examples force us to give up one or other of the two theses that thought-content determines reference, and that thoughts are in the head. My suggestion is that we can retain both claims by dropping the idea that thought-content (by itself) *logically* determines reference.

(F) *Action on individuals*

I have argued that the explanation of an action should be the same, whether the subject's experience be veridical or hallucinatory, and whether the act be that of myself or my doppelgänger. Yet an argument which seems to have been particularly influential, amongst defenders of Russellian thoughts, is that sometimes what needs explaining is action on an individual.[22] If I kick Tiddles, then what may need explaining is that it is Tiddles whom I kick, rather than her Twin-Earth double. It is urged that this will require attributing to me an object-involving (Russellian) thought, rather than a thought which I share with my doppelgänger.

However, it is not true that the only way of explaining how it is that I come to kick a particular cat is by attributing to me the decision to kick *that* cat. On the contrary, the explanation can just as well proceed in two stages, first attributing to me a decision whose content is described in such a way that I share it with my doppelgänger, then stating that it is a particular cat (that cat) which is the one positioned within kicking distance of me. This two-stage procedure has the advantage of giving a common element to the explanation of mine and my doppelgänger's actions: for since our actions are exactly similar, it seems only reasonable that there should be something common in their explanation.

To this it might be replied that what needs explaining is not simply the fact that my action came to involve a particular cat, but rather that it was intentional under a description which mentions that animal. The intentional action I performed was not simply kicking *a* cat (the cat in question happening to be Tiddles). Rather I intentionally kicked Tiddles. Now this may be true, but it is not difficult to explain on the sort of account I have been defending. For the question how an intention comes to concern a particular object is precisely the same as the question how a thought comes to concern a particular object. And in both cases the answer is: via the skills and dispositions of the thinking subject. So explaining the fact that I intentionally kicked Tiddles can be a matter of attributing to me a certain singular thought, or singular decision (but described in such a way that I share it with my doppelgänger), and then explaining that the 'projection' of that thought into the world led me to kick Tiddles in virtue of it being Tiddles who is in my vicinity, and who is the source of the information on which my thought is based.

(G) *Thought Identity*

What, in general, are the identity conditions for demonstrative thoughts?

[22] See *VOR*, pp. 203–4; Christopher Peacocke, 'Demonstrative Thought and Psychological Explanation', *Synthese*, 1981, pp. 187–217; John McDowell, 'De Re Senses', in *Frege: Tradition and Influence*, ed. C. Wright, Blackwell, 1984, pp. 98–109, n. 32. The argument is responded to, in similar manner to myself, by Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, p. 327, and by Noonan, *op. cit.*

When do demonstrative thought-tokens have the very same content, and when are their contents distinct? Although difficult, these questions cannot be wholly left to one side if my rejection of Russellianism is to be convincing. For if there are such things as non-Russellian demonstrative thoughts, then it must be possible to state acceptable identity conditions for them.

Some necessary conditions for demonstrative thought-identity are fairly straightforward. Firstly, the predicative element in the thoughts must be the same, by the Intuitive Criterion of Difference. The thoughts 'That butterfly is valuable' and 'That butterfly is worth having' probably satisfy this condition, whereas 'That butterfly is valuable' and 'That butterfly is beautiful' do not. Secondly, the kind of thing demonstratively indicated must be believed by the thinker to be the same. So 'That butterfly is beautiful' and 'That leaf is beautiful' would differ in content, whereas 'That butterfly is beautiful' and 'That one is beautiful' could have the same content (if the thinker believes that what is being indicated is a butterfly).

I have already committed myself, in the discussion of the doppelgänger examples, to a sufficient condition of thought-identity: namely if (besides satisfying the necessary conditions outlined above) all of the subjects' beliefs and experiences are the same. So both I and my doppelgänger entertain thoughts with the same content if I think 'That butterfly is valuable' and he thinks (in exactly similar circumstances) 'That one is worth having'. But it is hardly very likely that this condition is also necessary. It would be implausible to maintain that all the mental states of a subject are so holistically intertwined with one another that any change in belief or experience would be sufficient to render the content of every other belief or thought different. If I and my doppelgänger happen to differ just in this, that I but not he believe Schubert to be a better composer that Chopin, or that I but not he can hear a military band playing in the distance, then it would surely be absurd to insist on that ground that our demonstrative thoughts about our butterflies must differ in content.

Can we then go to the opposite extreme, and insist that all thought-tokens of the form 'That butterfly is valuable' share the same content, no matter what else may be true of the thinker? Clearly not. For if, in the presence of two butterflies, I think 'That one is valuable and that one is not' I have obviously entertained two distinct thoughts. (I have not contradicted myself.) In this case the thoughts differ in content in virtue of my belief that the butterflies occupy distinct places. So what I suggest is that a further necessary condition (and with the others, jointly sufficient) of demonstrative thought-identity, is that the thought-tokens be based upon perceptions that represent the objects as being in (or moving through) the same regions of the thinker's egocentric space. Then if Mary, in London, has perceptions of a butterfly moving from left to right immediately in front of her and thinks 'That one is valuable'; and Jane, in Leeds, also has perceptions of a butterfly moving from left to right in front of her (though the butterflies may be in

other respects dissimilar) and thinks 'That one is valuable', they have entertained thoughts with the very same content.

An apparent difficulty with this suggestion is as follows: suppose that I am moving along a show-case, pausing every so often in front of an exhibit to think 'That butterfly is valuable'. Then, on the account above, I am thinking the very same thought over and over again. Yet surely if at some point I think 'That one is not valuable' I have not contradicted myself. Now, so far the difficulty is only apparent, for the Intuitive Criterion of Difference applies only to thoughts entertained at one and the same time. There is no contradiction involved in taking different epistemic attitudes to the same thought at different times. However, demonstrative thoughts will often give rise to persisting beliefs. So there will, after all, be a problem for my account if those beliefs possess the very same content as the thoughts in which they originated. For then on my account I will, while continuing to believe the content expressed by 'That butterfly is valuable', be able to think 'That butterfly is not valuable'.

My response is to deny that when a demonstrative thought 'hardens' into a persisting belief, it can ever retain the same content. For such a change will have to be accompanied by a shift in the thinker's mode of determination of the object thought about. When entertaining a demonstrative thought they can rely upon the content of their perceptual experience to distinguish its object. (They can always, as it were, follow up the causal chain leading to the object, rather in the way that a bloodhound can follow the trail leading to its quarry.) But once their thoughts are no longer founded on current perception, then the thinker will require additional identifying information to distinguish the object of their thought from others. For example, they will need to recall where ('It was at the first show-case') or when ('It was the first one I looked at') the belief-originating thought occurred. It is thus part of the identity-conditions of a demonstrative thought that it be perceptually based; and the mere fact of becoming memory-based constitutes an alteration in content.

I claim, then, that all demonstrative thought-tokens ascribing the same predicate to what the thinker takes to be an instance of the same kind of thing, and where the thoughts are based upon perceptions representing that thing as occupying the same position in egocentric space, will possess the same content. Such thoughts can be entertained by many different thinkers, concerning what are in fact many different objects. And, more importantly for my purposes, they can be entertained in the absence of an object.[23]

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[Footnotes]

[3] **Invited Introduction: Finding Psychology**
Simon Blackburn
The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 143, Special Issue: Mind, Causation and Action. (Apr., 1986), pp. 111-122.
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