

There's No Need to Mock!
Comments on Sarah Sawyer's 'The Epistemic Divide'
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1. Introduction

Now that semantic externalism has broken down the metaphysical divide between mind and world, Sawyer urges us also to abandon the epistemic divide between relatively direct and certain thoughts about the contents of one's own mind and less direct, relatively uncertain thoughts about objects in an external world. Externalism shows that even thoughts about inner space, if they are to be genuine thought at all, are of the less secure variety. Now I am not convinced that the metaphysical divide is really what generated the epistemic divide in the first place. In the *Meditations*, it seems the other way around: the *apparent* security or indubitability about the contents of one's own mind suggested to Descartes that the objects of thought couldn't be located alongside the ordinary objects of an external, empirical world. But that is just an historical quibble. There is a deeper issue that I'd like to address here. I would agree with Sawyer that there is some sort of tension between externalism and the epistemic priority of thoughts about the contents (or truth conditions) of one's own thoughts. Externalism, as I understand it, is the thesis that one cannot determine these truth conditions without looking to a subject's wider environmental or linguistic surroundings. (Thus meaning isn't contained wholly in the head.) If a subject is mistaken about these content-determining features of their surroundings, then they are liable to be mistaken about the contents of their very own thoughts. However, I don't see why externalism must be connected with Russellian concerns about the ultimate constituents of propositions. And I think we ought to resist Sawyer's proposal to assimilate propositions involving natural kind terms (and even proper names) to strongly object-dependent, demonstrative thoughts.

2. Strongly Object-dependent Thoughts

So how ought we understand the notion of a strongly object-dependent, or "essentially *de re*" thought, one for which the objects thought about must exist? In particular, what should we think of the "mock thoughts" that such thoughts are liable to become, should the objects they purport to be about turn out not to exist? Surely, we should avoid simply running together the notion of a mock thought with that of a bona-fide thought that is merely false. For that reason, I find myself leery of Sawyer's metaphorical exposition of a mock thought as one in which a subject, perhaps unwittingly, "enters into the fictional realm." For couldn't we say that of anyone who has a belief that somehow doesn't match the way things really are? To avoid this collapse, I think the concept of a mock thought is best elucidated if we turn to *third-person ascriptions of thought*. (This is good practice in general. By concentrating on the third-person, rather than self ascriptions, we'll be less likely to be led astray by Moore-type paradoxes.) My understanding is that mock thoughts are those that are not available to others to attribute to that subject, and so not publicly understandable. For example, let's suppose SS were to entertain a thought, which she would most naturally express as "This here cup is full of water." And now let's consider how *you or I* would ascribe this thought to her. If there is indeed a cup in front of her, we could also exploit our perceptual link to the cup to attribute to her a thought *about this here cup*. We would naturally say that she believes that this here cup is full of water. The thing to notice about this *third-person ascription* is that it plausibly requires an existential commitment *on the part of the ascriber*. It's a bit weird to report that SS believes that this here cup is full of water, but then to deny that this here cup exists. That is, my report that SS believes that this here cup is full of water commits me to the cup's existence. In the absence of this here cup, I cannot truly *understand* what SS believes in the sense that I can't express her thought in a manner that corresponds to the way she would be disposed to express it. Instead, the best I could do would be to point out that SS believes there to be *a cup* in front of her and that it (the cup she believes to be in front of her) is full of water. So in the absence of the cup, I would take SS to be having a "mock thought," understood here as one that is not available for me to attribute to her.

3. Natural Kind Terms

By contrast, consider thoughts involving natural kind terms and proper names. Instead of depending upon a speaker's own perceptual contact with an object or kind, the use of such linguistic devices typically exploit the capacities of *others* to recognize or reidentify the objects or kinds in question. It is through such a division of linguistic labor that I am capable of having thoughts about Aristotle (who I wouldn't know from Adam) or about elms (which I can't distinguish from beeches). And it's through this reference borrowing that you can *now* entertain thoughts about my cat Ickey, whereas Ickey is currently unable to entertain thoughts about you. Of course, the price we pay for such referential power is that we can be radically mistaken about how to apply these terms properly, and hence, we can be radically mistaken about our commitments when we use them. However, the question that faces us is this: can thoughts involving natural kind terms or proper names be mock thoughts (or unintelligible to others) in the same way that thoughts about this here cup can be? I don't think so; for they wouldn't seem to be strongly object dependent, at least not in the same way that demonstrative thoughts are. Whereas I can't ascribe to SS the thought that this here cup is full of water without committing myself to the existence of something properly identified as this here cup, it wouldn't seem that I would have to be similarly committed to the actual existence of some stuff that is properly called water. Unlike genuinely object-dependent thoughts, I can intelligibly attribute to others (and so understand) thoughts about water (or about Aristotle, and even Santa) without taking on any existential commitments to its actual existence. It makes sense to say that SS is thinking about water, while at the same time maintaining that no such stuff exists.

4. The Instance Argument

Consequently, I'm not persuaded by Sawyer's "instance argument" in the case of names and natural kind terms, for I think there is very good reason to reject its second premise, the one which reads:

(2) To have thoughts about water, water must exist.

[Note- This isn't exactly the way Sawyer phrases this premise; her first-person construal invites Moore-type quandaries.]

Unlike thoughts about "this here cup," thoughts about water don't require the presence of some substance that a subject can properly recognize or reidentify as water. For one thing, all the stuff that was formerly called water might have been replaced with some entirely different substance XYZ. But more importantly, even though a speaker might be relying upon the fact that something in the past was once dubbed water, it doesn't follow that that stuff was *properly* called water. Indeed, stuff that would properly be called water might not ever have existed. This is clearly what we want to say in the case of empty kind terms, such as phlogiston or witch. While some poor unfortunates might have once been initially dubbed "witches," this term's essential membership in an inadequate theory of the world dooms it, like phlogiston, to a life of emptiness. If Sawyer were right, then I couldn't ultimately understand you when you sincerely accuse me of witchcraft and of filling this room up with hot phlogiston. But this is much too high a price to pay. I can understand you perfectly well, and I can intelligibly attribute to you the thought that you think I'm a witch that fills up the room with hot phlogiston. Your accusations are not mock, as Sawyer would seem to suggest, and so lacking; rather, I would most vigorously protest that they are *false*.

5. Conclusion

One doesn't have to subscribe to Sawyer's instance argument to be an externalist about semantic content. I consider myself an externalist about content determination. But I see nothing in that thesis to drive me to the essential object-dependency of thoughts expressed with natural kind terms and names (or even to the very existence of mock thoughts). Rather than tracing the motivation for externalism back to Russellian concerns about the ultimate constituents of propositions, my commitment to externalism simply stems from the idea that the content or truth conditions of many of my thoughts can only be determined by looking to the speech dispositions of others in my linguistic community, especially those to whom I ought to defer as experts (those who can identify who or what they are talking about). Natural kind terms do indeed figure prominently in these considerations, but not exactly in the manner that Sawyer suggests.