

The “New Mind” Revisited, or Minding the Content/Vehicle Distinction: A response to Manzotti and Pepperell

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Abstract: I argue that Manzotti and Pepperell’s presentation of the New Mind not only obfuscates pertinent differences between externalist views of various strengths, but also, and most problematically, conflates a distinction that cannot, without consequences, be conflated. We can talk about the contents of the mind and/or about the vehicles of those contents. But we should not conflate the two. Conflation of contents and vehicles comes with a price. In Manzotti and Pepperell’s case, it undermines claims they make about the implications of the New Mind.

1. “[T]he contemporary views about the mind are changing,” Manzotti and Pepperell tell us (2012, p. 2). “Certain scientific, philosophical and technological factors” vindicate a view of mentality according to which the mind isn’t contained within its cranial prison; the mind instead is “spread out through the body and into the environment” (*ibid.*). Manzotti and Pepperell dub this externalist conception of the mind “New Mind” (*ibid.*).¹ In what follows, I argue that Manzotti and Pepperell’s presentation of the New Mind not only obfuscates pertinent differences between externalist views of various strengths, but also, and most problematically, conflates a distinction that cannot, without consequences, be conflated. We can talk about the contents of the mind and/or about the vehicles of those contents. But we should not conflate the two. Conflation of contents and vehicles comes with a price (Dennett 1991; Hurley 1998). In Manzotti and Pepperell’s case, it undermines claims they make about the implications of the New Mind.

2. *Mental* content is the content possessed by mental states.² But what is *content*? To a first approximation, we can say that contents are what thoughts, beliefs, desires, perceptions, etc., are made of. Advancing a more precise definition of content turns out to be a trickier task, for the relevant literature offers more than one definition of mental content. For instance, some

¹ The aforesaid conception of the mind, as the authors themselves recognize, isn’t really *new*. Not only does it have a long philosophical history, it has also been the subject of a vigorous debate in the last fifteen or so years. (see, e.g., Clark 1997 and 2008; Clark and Chalmers 1998, Rowlands 1999, 2003, 2006; and 2010; Hurley 1998; Rupert 2004 and 2010; Adams and Aizawa 2001, 2010a, and 2010b; and Wilson 2004)

² Do mental *processes*, in addition to mental states, possess mental content? Here I shall assume that they do but only derivatively. That is to say, mental processes possess mental content only insofar as the products of such processes – i.e., mental states – can be contentful.

hold that the content of a mental state is that which the state is about: an object, property, or state of affairs. Others maintain that contents are modes of presentations – i.e., ways in which something is presented to us. Yet others combine these two understandings of content into one.³ Fortunately, we need not adjudicate between these different conceptions of content here. Any one of the aforementioned definitions will do. What primarily concerns us isn't the notion of content *per se*, but the distinction between contents and vehicles – specifically, the distinction between mental content and vehicles of such content.

The notion of representation is often used to flesh out the content/vehicle distinction: it is said that content is what a representation is a representation *of* and vehicle is the representation itself. However, an immediate problem with this understanding of the content/vehicle distinction, when applied to mental content, is that it suggests that only representations can be the vehicles of mental contents. But the nature of such vehicles is an empirical issue. As such, it shouldn't be settled by terminology.

For the present purposes, I shall stipulate that vehicles are the material or physical machinery – subpersonal events or processes – that *enable* a system to possess mental states and run mental processes (Cf. Rowlands 2010, p. 191; Clark 2008, p. 76). Stated otherwise: the vehicles are the physical structures *in virtue of which* mental states and processes occur. This understanding of vehicles doesn't restrict vehicles to representations, nor does it impose an isomorphism between (properties of) contents and (properties of) vehicles.^{4, 5}

3. There is externalism about mental content (*content externalism*) and there is externalism about the vehicles of mental content (*vehicle externalism*). The former holds that the contents of some mental states of a subject depend for their *individuation* on factors external to the subject (Burge 1979; Putnam 1975). Under the assumption that there exist mental states that possess

³ For a outstanding presentation of the different accounts of mental content, I direct the reader to Hopp (2011, ch. 1).

⁴ Dennett and Kinsbourne (1992, p. 149) express this latter requirement clearly: “we must distinguish features of representings from the features of representeds... someone can shout ‘softly, on tiptoe’ at the top of his lungs, there are gigantic pictures of microscopic objects, and oil paintings of artists making charcoal sketches. The top sentence of a written description of a standing man need not describe his head, nor the bottom sentence his feet. To suppose otherwise is to confusedly superimpose two different spaces: the representing space and the represented space.” See also Hurley (1998, p. 28)

⁵ Other descriptions of vehicles of mental states can be found in Hurley (1998, ch. 1) and (Rowlands 2006, ch. 3).

their contents essentially, then content externalism is (also) a thesis about the individuation of those mental states.

The label “content externalism” doesn’t denote a monolithic theoretical position. For instance, there’s a version of content externalism that holds that although the *intentional* content of mental states is externally individuated, their *phenomenal* character isn’t. (The phenomenal character, according to this view, doesn’t supervene on intentional content.) There’s also a version of content externalism that splits mental content into two components, *narrow* and *broad*, only the latter of which is externally individuated. Authors attracted to such a divided picture of mental content, typically assert that phenomenal character reduces to narrow content.

Regardless of its variety, content externalism is a thesis about the individuation of the contents of mental states. But vehicle externalism is a thesis about the *constitution* and *location* of the vehicles of those states. It holds that the subpersonal events or processes that enable a system to possess mental states and run mental processes can be located outside the head of the subject (or better, outside the nervous system of an organism). More precisely: vehicle externalism holds that the vehicles of *some* (but not all) mental processes and states *can* (but do not necessarily have to) involve environmental and bodily structures as their mereological constituents. To be clear, vehicle externalism does not deny that an internal, neural core is needed in order for cognition and perception to take place. What it does deny is the claim that the vehicles of cognition and perception have to be *necessarily* and *solely* composed out of this internal, neural core.

4. The relationship between content externalism and vehicle externalism is important. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, vehicle externalism does not imply content externalism. One can accept an internalist theory of content individuation and still maintain that the vehicles of those contentful states are extended. But does content externalism entail vehicle externalism? It doesn’t. The contents of certain mental states might depend on external factors, yet the vehicles that give rise to those states can be internal, viz. located inside the head or skin of the subject (or organism). After all, content externalism is a thesis about the individuation of the contents of mental states and not about the location of the vehicles of those states.

Having said that, it is tempting to think that the acceptance of a Russellian view of mental content, which one might take to be a form of content externalism, does entail vehicle externalism. Thus, there is at least one way in which vehicle externalism follows from content externalism. Or so one might hold. Take, for example, the belief “the moon is round.” According to the Russellian view (or at least, according to a certain version of this), the content of such a belief consists of the referent of “moon” – i.e., the moon itself – and the property expressed by “round.”⁶ But if external objects, such as the moon, can be constituents of my beliefs, then doesn’t that show that the vehicles of cognition extend? Not really. In order for the Russellian view to entail vehicle externalism, one must also assume that the contents of mental states are *parts* (i.e., constituents) of the vehicles of those states. Whether this assumption is one that can be coherently accepted, I shall not examine. Suffice it to say that such an assumption is neither a component of the Russellian view nor of content externalism. As such, proponents of both views can reject it.

Lastly, suppose that one does accept the aforesaid assumption about the relationship between contents and their vehicles. In such a case, the Russellian view of content would entail vehicle externalism. Yet, it would also entail the *rejection* of content externalism. If the contents of mental states involve worldly constituents and if such constituents are assumed to be parts of the vehicles of mental states, then the contents cease to be *external* to the mind (see also Rupert 2004, p. 398, n.17).

5. The New Mind, Manzotti and Pepperell tell us, “resists the notion of a mind isolated in a head and promotes instead a view of the mind that extends or spreads into the body and world beyond” (4). Given our discussion of the content/vehicle distinction, we can now see that the above description of the New Mind fails to specify what aspect of the mind extends. Stated otherwise, Manzotti and Pepperell don’t unequivocally answer the question, what does the term “mind” in “New Mind” denote? Does it denote the contents of our mental states,

⁶ In discussions of the contents of experience, one also finds a weaker variation of the Russellian view. This is a weaker view because it holds that (at least in the case of experiences) the contents of experiences involve the *properties* that things seem to have but not the *objects* that seem to have those properties. See e.g., Chalmers 2004.

the vehicles of those contents, or both? Unfortunately, the above passage isn't the only passage that is plagued by such an ambiguity.⁷

Even though Manzotti and Pepperell's preferred variety of externalism isn't entirely transparent, there is sufficient enough textual evidence to suggest that the label "New Mind" refers (primarily, at least) to a family of philosophical and scientific positions that espouse a version of vehicle externalism: namely, the version which holds that the vehicles of both cognitive mental states and conscious (or phenomenal) mental states are located outside the central nervous system of the agent (or system).⁸ Their view is thus stronger than "active externalism" of Clark and Chalmers (1998), which is committed to externalism about the vehicles of *cognitive* processes and states, but does not accept that the vehicles of consciousness also extend.

6. Although one can, after some textual investigation, deduce the crux of Manzotti and Pepperell's position, the ambiguity of how to understand the term "mind" infects their claims about the implications of the New Mind. This problem becomes particularly pressing when one turns to the implications that the New Mind has, according to the authors, for our understanding of both aesthetics and our relationship to technological artifacts

6.1. *Aesthetics*. In the case of aesthetics, Manzotti and Pepperell hold that the New Mind yields "explanatory dividends" (6). Specifically, by adopting an externalist view about the vehicles of

⁷ Consider, for example, the authors' claims on p. 4. There they state: "While the various challenges to the internally located view of the mind are undeniably varied in target and approach there is a common thread that binds them: each resists the notion of a mind isolated in a head and promotes instead a view of the mind that extends or spreads into the body and world beyond." In this passage, the term "mind" is again problematically left unspecified. As a result it isn't clear whether the quoted passage is an expression of content externalism, of vehicle externalism, or of both. For additional passages that exhibit the same type of failure of specificity, see pages 5 and 8.

⁸ I assume that Manzotti and Pepperell also accept content externalism: both for intentional content and for the phenomenal character of mental states. This is only an assumption on my behalf and I submit that it could turn out to be false. In discussions of externalism, it is atypical to find proponents of vehicle externalism that deny content externalism. Although it is atypical, there's no incoherence in such a combination of views – see §4. There is at least one claim in their paper that suggests that Manzotti and Pepperell in addition to vehicle externalism they also espouse a Russellian view of mental content. They write: "Once the barriers between the world we perceive and our perceptions of the world are removed then reality becomes *part of* what we experience rather than some internally mediated but remote external realm" (4). As I explain in §4, an acceptance of such a view about the nature of mental content coupled with an acceptance of vehicle externalism, seems to entail a rejection of content externalism. Unfortunately, the authors pass over in silence this important issue.

the mind one can understand better how art functions. The authors explain their view in the following passage:

[1] But aesthetic experience is a mental phenomenon, and as such constitutes part of the mind of the person undergoing the experience. Under the New Mind paradigm, the physical location of this experience can no longer be attributed to the head alone but must spread into the world...[2] Given the New Mind paradigm, studying aesthetic responses on the basis that they must be accounted for by brain activity alone would produce misleading results about the nature of that experience and a distorted view of how art functions. No doubt the brain has a role to play in our appreciation of art, but to fully understand such phenomenon we must also consider those aspects of the 'aesthetic situation' that lie beyond the head. [3] Berleant argues we need to see this in terms of a distributed set of processes, which include the mental properties embedded in the artwork as well as those embedded in the viewer. On this view, works of art are not simply inert physical objects but actually contain, albeit in latent form, the thoughts, ideas and feelings of the artists who made them (5).

I divided the above passage into three claims ([1]-[3]). Manzotti and Pepperell run the three claims together, as if they seamlessly formulate a unified whole, but they do not. Consider claim [1] first. In all likelihood, claim [1] is meant by the authors to be an application of vehicle externalism: that is to say, it is meant to state that the vehicles of aesthetic experience extend beyond the head. I say in all likelihood, because the claim can be consistent with a Russellian view of mental content that asserts that environmental structures and objects are constituents of such content. Indeed, the word “experience” is ambiguous between “the vehicles of experience” or “the contents of experience.” In other words, claim [1] is ambiguous between a content-reading and a vehicle-reading.

But ambiguity isn't the only issue with the quoted passage. Suppose that claim [1] is indeed a claim about the vehicles of experiences. Claims [2] and [3] are normative claims about the proper understanding of aesthetics. They assert that in order to understand art properly (and how art functions) one “must also consider those aspects of the 'aesthetic situation' that lie beyond the head” (*ibid.*). But one can agree with the authors' claim without espousing an externalist conception of the mind. One can accept an internalist view about the vehicles of the mind and still hold that properly understanding how art functions requires “considering

those aspects of the ‘aesthetic situation’ that lie beyond the head” (*ibid.*). The historical (or political or social) context in which a work of art was created, for instance, seems to be precisely an aspect that *does* lie beyond the head.

In turn, the authors claim that works of art “contain, albeit in latent form, the thoughts, ideas and feelings of the artists who made them” (*ibid.*). But what does it mean to say that such objects contain thoughts, ideas, and feelings? One reading of this statement (a reading that is in fact supported by their own qualification or provision: “albeit in a latent form”) holds that when works of art are perceived by a perceiver, they cause in the perceiver certain experiences and thoughts. Once again, such an understanding of aesthetic experience is clearly in line with an internalist view about the vehicles of the mind. Hence, not only is the above passage plagued by an ambiguity, but moreover, the authors’ claims about how art functions are compatible with an internalist conception of the mind.

Manzotti and Pepperell make a further claim about the explanatory strength of the New Mind when it comes to aesthetics. They hold that an espousal of the New Mind provides us with a solution to a pressing problem in the philosophy of art: “how to account for art’s affective power ... [or] why do we relate so strongly to the emotions depicted in the apparently inert and inanimate artifacts such as paintings” (6). It is hard to know what to make of this claim and consequently, of the authors’ suggested solution to the problem that philosophy of art allegedly faces. That is because the authors neither establish that the aforesaid issue *is* a problem in philosophy of art nor do they even begin to show that internalist conceptions fail to provide an answer to this alleged problem.

In any case, let’s put those two rather serious concerns aside. Even then, there is still a problem with the authors’ proposed solution: there is nothing specifically externalist about their solution. Here’s the relevant passage:

Think of the terror of the victims in Goya’s *The Third of May 1808* (1814) or the quiet despair of the seated woman in Degas’ *L’Absinthe* (1876). If the mental qualities of terror and despair do not reside in some way within the fabric of the works then we have to ask where else they could be, given that we only have access to them is through the works alone. This is not to suggest the painting in either case is ‘alive’ or ‘thinking’ independently of being observed but rather that when seen by a sufficiently empathetic person those qualities can be appreciated through the reciprocal relationship between the work and the viewer (*ibid.*).

In the above passage we are told that “the mental qualities of terror and despair” reside in the works of arts themselves. We are also told that the works of art aren’t thinking nor are they alive. But how can those mental qualities reside *in* the works if the works aren’t thinking (or aren’t alive)? The authors’ solution⁹ is that those qualities reside in the works in a qualified sense. That is, they reside in the works of arts insofar as they “can be appreciated” when a suitable observer perceives the works of art under question (*ibid.*). If this, however, is the authors’ solution to the problem of how one can account for the affective power of works of art, then the offered solution is one that can be accepted happily by proponents of internalist view about the vehicles of the mind. Nothing in the proposed solution is incongruous with a view that holds that the vehicles of experience are located inside the head.

Perhaps the authors could respond by claiming that I have somehow misconstrued their position. They might claim that what they mean to say instead is the following: the works of art themselves are parts of the vehicles of aesthetic experiences.¹⁰ However, there are at least two problems with this stronger reading of the passage. First, it really doesn’t seem true that the works of arts are mereological parts of the vehicles of perception. Typical examples of environmental objects or structures that are or can become parts of the vehicles of perception, such as the cane of a blind agent, are objects or structures that the agents *use* and depend upon in order to perform certain tasks. But this isn’t the case with works of art. Second, if the authors allow works of art to be parts of the vehicles of perception, then what stops the sun, Mount Everest, or any possible object of perception from being a part of the vehicles of perception as well? In other words, if the works of art are allowed to be parts of the vehicles of perception, then we lose track of what is a mind and what isn’t. Vehicle externalism, however, *presupposes* that we can meaningfully draw that distinction.

6.2. *Technology*. An acceptance of the New Mind does not only have implications for aesthetics, it also carries implications for how we perceive our relationship to technology. This is, of

⁹ Although I have serious reservations as to whether we should be calling the authors’ suggestion a “solution” to the alleged problem that philosophy of art faces, I will continue to call it as such. Discussing whether their suggestion constitutes a solution to the alleged problem will take me too far afield.

¹⁰ There is even a *third* possible reading of this passage: the works of arts are proper parts of the *contents* of perception. Although such a view is more plausible than the one that states that works of art are parts of the vehicles of perception, it isn’t a form of vehicle externalism. Once again, we see that the meaning of, and intent behind, the authors’ claims become obfuscated by the fact that they conflate the content/vehicle distinction.

course, an idea that has been argued most rigorously by Andy Clark (see, e.g., Clark 1997, 2003, and 2008). In agreement with Clark's position the authors hold that according to the New Mind, under certain circumstances, external objects can become parts of one's mind. More precisely, they hold that such objects can become parts of the vehicles of one's mind. Under the right circumstances, smartphones, notebooks, and other artifacts can, according to this view, become literal parts of one's mind.

A rather popular response to such an externalist position is to maintain that proponents of this position have committed a certain type of mistake: they have confused factors that *causally contribute* to cognition with factors that *constitute* cognition (see, e.g., Adams and Aizawa 2010b). Granted, the response continues, environmental structures and artifacts do contribute causally to certain cognitive processes. Yet it is a mistake to conclude from that fact that they constitute those processes. (In the relevant literature this objection is known as the "coupling-constitution fallacy.")

Manzotti and Pepperell take up the task of responding to this objection. They offer the following two-fold response:

First, there are significant quantities of intelligence, knowledge and experience bound up in the design, manufacture and use of [artifacts.] As with all human-made objects, and with technology in particular, the material artifact is shaped, formed, constructed, or engineered as much by the mind of the maker as by any material process, and therefore stands as an expression of that mind no less than other ways in which minds are expressed (such as speech, gesture, behaviour, etc.). The expression of an idea, therefore, is regarded as a constituent of that idea. Second, is the rather straightforward conceptual point that whatever our minds attend to at any moment is, logically speaking, a bona fide part of the mind in question. If I give thought to a pencil, or a painting, then it seems reasonable to include those objects as part of the mind in which they feature (8).

Both claims made by the authors are striking. First, one is at a loss in trying to understand the authors' claim that the expression of an idea is a constituent of an idea. Notice that the way that this claim is stated leads one to think that what preceded the claim somehow provides support for it. They write: "The expression of an idea, *therefore*, is regarded as a constituent of that idea" (*ibid.*, emphasis mine). But this claim isn't supported by what comes before it. From

the fact that certain artifacts express the intentions of their designers, one cannot conclude that for every expression of an idea, that expression is a *constituent* of that idea. What's more, we never get an account of the nature of ideas. What are ideas, according to the authors? Without such an account it is quite hard to try to evaluate the authors' claim.

Since the authors do not provide an account of ideas, I will be charitable and suggest one understanding that could in principle provide support for their externalist view. Suppose that in the above passage the authors are making, albeit implicitly, the following argument: (Premise 1) artifacts are expressions of the intentions or beliefs of their designers; (Premise 2) if something is an expression of an intention or a belief, then that something is a constituent of that intention or belief; therefore, artifacts are constituents of their designers' intentions and beliefs. According to my suggestion, the word "idea" is used rather liberally and refers (perhaps in addition to other things) to intentions and beliefs. However, if this is how we should understand the authors' claims, then we have no reason to accept them. Premise 2 is not only unmotivated but also unsubstantiated. Indeed, consider the following principle: **(Exp)** If E is an expression of P , then E is a constituent of P . (Exp) is false. The utterance "there are no three positive integers (x, y, z) that can satisfy the equation $a^x + b^y = c^z$ for any integer value of n that is greater than two" is an expression of Fermat's Last Theorem. The utterance, however, isn't a constituent of that theorem. Or the true utterance "there is a car outside my house" is an expression of the fact that there is a car outside of my house. It is certainly not a constituent of that fact. Since (Exp) is false, then, unless the authors give us a reason to think that (Exp) holds when it is applied to intentions and beliefs, we should reject the argument that I provided in their support. Consequently, we should reject the authors' first response to the coupling-constitution fallacy.

In the latter part of the quoted passage, the authors offer a second response to the coupling-constitution fallacy. They state that if a mind attends to P , then P is part of the mind. But this claim is ambiguous between a content-reading and a vehicle-reading. On the one hand, the content-reading holds that if a mind attends to P , then P is part of the *contents* of the mind. On the other hand, the vehicle-reading states that if a mind attends to P , then P is part of the *vehicles* of the mind. Once again, the authors conflate these two readings. And they do so because they conflate the content/vehicle distinction. What seems to be a "conceptual point" might be the fact that what we attend to becomes part of the contents of our mind. It

is certainly not a conceptual point that that to which we attend becomes part of the vehicles of our mind.

7. In this essay, I have argued that Manzotti and Pepperell conflate a rather important distinction: that between the contents of mental states and the vehicles of those states. A conflation of that distinction has led the authors to claims that are either unsubstantiated or false. *En route* to showing that the authors conflate the content/vehicle distinction, I also pointed out additional problems with the authors' arguments.

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