

Disentangled Externalisms

Ali Kerem Eroğlu¹

Abstract

In contemporary philosophy of mind, the consensus is that content externalism and vehicle externalism are logically independent. Both proponents and critics of content externalism agree that content externalism does not entail vehicle externalism, and vice versa. Sprevak and Kallestrup have recently challenged that view and argued that the conviction that content externalism and vehicle externalism are logically independent is not true for various forms of vehicle externalism. (Sprevak and Kallestrup 2014) According to them, what one can mean by vehicle externalism is vague and this is a problematic for understanding the relationship between content externalism and vehicle externalism. My aim here is to respond to their analysis of the subject by arguing that what they call “realization-vehicle externalism” is the most precisely formulated type of vehicle externalism and with an even more precise understanding of it, the independency principle (IP) is in no trouble. I will mostly use their terminology to avoid any possible misunderstandings.

In §1, I will clarify what one means by content externalism and vehicle externalism comparing both of them to internalist accounts of content and pointing out the most straightforward differences. In §2, I consider some different types of vehicle externalism examined by Sprevak and Kallestrup and include further analysis of where they differ. I will argue that the differences stem from the philosophical motivation behind these definitions. In §3, the problems with the two most promising types of vehicle externalism are discussed and I argue that the realization vehicle externalism (with some modifications) is the best type of vehicle externalism. Later in that section, I clarify these modifications and attempt to achieve a new characterization of realization vehicle externalism, which works properly with the independency principle.

1 Content Externalism vs. Vehicle Externalism

Philosophical theories about mental content try to explain the mechanisms behind one’s having a content bearing mental state, such as a particular belief or any other propositional attitude. On the one hand, the proponents of content internalism argue that mental content is narrow in the sense that all of these processes are totally within the body, more precisely, inside the brain of the individual. Of course, perception and sensation have a role in the process but ultimately they are only tools to set body-bound conditions. According to content internalists, the role of individuating the mental content belongs entirely to the individual. If this is the case, then the individual’s mental

¹ Ali Kerem Eroğlu is a first year Master’s student in Philosophy at Bilkent University. He graduated from the Department of Philosophy at Middle East Technical University after leaving the Department of Statistics at Ankara University. His main interest in philosophy is shaped around the nature of propositional attitudes, particularly beliefs, an area at the intersection of philosophy of mind, epistemology and philosophy of language.

states with content supervene on her internal features. That is, whenever the same internal features are present, the same mental content is individuated.

Content externalism, by contrast, holds that mental content is wide in the sense that it is at least partly individuated in respect of the relations between the individual and the external reality. As Sprevak and Kallestrup put it, content externalists argue that the individuation of mental content fails to supervene on internal features of the individual. (2014, p. 81) That is, two individuals with the same internal features can have quite different mental content if the physical and social environment they interact is to some extent different. This possibility is apparent in the traditional thought experiments for content externalism.

The most famous thought experiment on content externalism is Putnam's twin earth experiment. Suppose that there are two Earths that are exactly the same except for the fact that in (real) Earth the physical entity we refer to as water is H₂O while in the other Earth it is another substance, XYZ. Putnam argues that it could be the case that if I were to have a doppelganger in Twin Earth, then my doppelganger in the twin Earth would have the same underlying mental and psychological base as me whenever we have a content bearing mental state about water. Nonetheless, it is apparent that while in the real Earth I have some sort of propositional attitude about "water", my twin in the twin Earth would have the same sort of propositional attitude about "t-water". That is, the same supervenience base is shared in both cases where content differs- in one case the content is H₂O, and in the other, it is XYZ (Putnam 1973)².

A similar thought experiment is Tyler Burge's arthritis. Suppose a member of an English speaking community has a problem with her thighs. She goes and sees her doctor saying, "I have arthritis in my thigh." The doctor replies however, by saying that arthritis is a disease which would only take place at joints, not thighs. Hence, the patient has a false belief. In the counterfactual case, again similar to Putnam's twin Earth, everything stays the same except the fact that this time her linguistic community uses the word arthritis to refer a disease which could take place either at joints or at thighs. In this case, the patient has a true belief when she believes that she has arthritis on her thigh. Hence, although the psychological basis remains the same in both patients, the belief content that they have is clearly different. Mental content, then, Burge concludes, is not only determined by internal conditions but wider social factors can have a decisive impact on one's content bearing mental state (Burge 1979).

As we have seen in the traditional thought experiments, content externalism gives an account of how mental states with content are individuated, on which that content bearing mental states fail to supervene on the internal features of the individual. Rather, they supervene on the internal features of the individual plus the external features, which may be either physical such as Putnam's water, or socio-linguistic such as Burge's arthritis.

Vehicle externalism, on the other hand, holds that vehicle of content are not only within the body, but they go beyond the individual. Vehicle of content is simply the physical item underlying the mental state which includes that particular content.³ Therefore,

² Notice that this type of content externalism is about the natural kind terms. The intuition is that the content depends on the physical nature of the entities around us.

³ For the thesis of VE, it does not matter whether the relevant content is perceptual or conceptual, or whether there is a non-conceptual content of perception at all.

vehicle externalism gives an account of the nature of the content bearing mental states, namely, that they are not merely internal to the body. In recent literature of philosophy of mind, this view is generally called the extended mind thesis since in that view, human cognition ‘extends’ beyond the body. (Clark and Chalmers 1998) Throughout the last two decades, many philosophers who have argued for or against vehicle externalism have used different terminology and definitions of their own to put forward various views. What Sprevak and Kallestrup call the independence principle, however, has generally been agreed upon. IP simply holds that content externalism and vehicle externalism are logically independent and hence can be accepted or rejected independently. Admitting that the list is not exhaustive, Sprevak and Kallestrup analyze four different ways of defining vehicle externalism and rightly conclude that no version of vehicle externalism provides direct evidence to accept IP. (2014, 84-93)

In the next section, I will evaluate their analysis regarding different types of vehicle externalism, namely, Explanatory (E-VE), Minimal Supervenience Base (MSB-VE) and Realization (R-VE). I will ignore active externalism since it is not a favored version to ground vehicle externalism.⁴

2 Various Externalisms

Apart from active externalism, there are three versions of vehicle externalism that Sprevak and Kallestrup cite, which are defined in different ways and with different motivations. The first one is Noë’s explanatory definition. E-VE holds;

- (1) Vehicle externalism is true iff an external resource is explanatorily ineliminable.⁵

To be explanatorily ineliminable for any kind of mental state is to be necessarily involved in the explanation of the character of that state. E-VE states that without appealing to the external resources outside the body, it is not possible to properly explain the character of content bearing mental states. E-VE’s motivation for externalism, therefore, stems from the need to involve external resources in the explanation of the character of a content bearing mental state. E-VE, in that sense, is a way of defining vehicle externalism and does not concern itself with further constraints on vehicle externalism. The thesis is that vehicle externalism must be the case since it is simply impossible to explain the mental without vehicle externalism. For E-VE, further complications about vehicle externalism are nothing more than problems to be solved in the way to understand vehicle externalism. In that sense, E-VE is not even a definition; rather it is an argument for any specific kind of vehicle externalism.⁶

⁴ To discuss the problems of active externalism in grounding vehicle externalism would be unnecessary for the purpose of this paper. For the details of the problems of active externalism, see (Sprevak and Kallestrup 2014, 83-84).

⁵ This definition (1) and following definitions (2) and (3) are taken directly from (Sprevak and Kallestrup 2014) to avoid any possible ambiguity for the reader.

⁶ Here I discuss E-VE only as a distinct version of defining vehicle externalism, as Sprevak and Kallestrup do. Noë’s enactive approach to the nature of experience provides more about the constraints of a possible vehicle externalism. However, it tries to do this distinct from the particular argument E-VE provides. The enactive approach does put constraints on vehicle externalism and has a concern to precisely characterize a type of vehicle externalism, especially on the base of phenomenal experience and intersubjectivity. The enactive view, however, is out of the scope of this essay. For more details, see (Noë 2005) and (Thompson 2005).

The second formulation is Ned Block's definition of vehicle externalism, which appeals to *minimal supervenience base*. MSB-VE states;

- (2) Vehicle externalism is true iff an external resource is part of the minimal supervenience base for that mental state/process.

Minimal supervenience base, as its name suggests, is the minimal physical supervenience base for a mental state to occur. If minimal supervenience base includes resources other than body-bound physical states, then vehicle externalism turns out to be true since the minimal supervenience base would include external resources. MSB-VE seems to provide an overall good definition of vehicle externalism since it captures the core of any kind of externalism claim, namely the physical supervenience base of the mental. Notice that, "minimal", in this definition, implies a necessity. An external resource must be an essential part of the occurrence of the relevant mental state.

The last definition is the realization vehicle externalism. R-VE tries to elaborate vehicle externalism in order to have a clear understanding of it. R-VE states;

- (3) Vehicle externalism is true iff the mental state is realized by the conjunction of the agent's neural activity and an external resource.

R-VE makes the very clear claim about the nature of vehicle externalism that some mental states are "realized" in the way they are not only by body-bound physical states. Using the notion of realization, R-VE adds to the discussions grounded on supervenience. It holds that supervenience is not enough to ground vehicle externalism; vehicle externalism is an account about the mechanisms of content-bearing mental states *realize* in the way they do. Theories of content based merely on supervenience fail to include that as a definition of vehicle externalism. R-VE tries to solve this problem by an appeal to the notion of realization.

Regarding these three definitions, Sprevak and Kallestrup write;

"Min-supervenience differs from Explanatory. There is no reason why explanation of the existence or character of a mental state/process should make ineliminable reference to everything in its minimal supervenience base; indeed, such an explanation is likely to be too detailed to be informative."

(Sprevak and Kallestrup 2014, 85)

and,

"Realization differs from Explanatory. The explanation of the existence or character of a mental state/process need not appeal to all, or indeed appeal to only, the realizers of that mental state/process."

(Sprevak and Kallestrup 2014, 86)

It is clear that E-VE is different from both MSB-VE and R-VE. This difference, however, is not a matter of foundation, but it is a matter of perspective. E-VE, as we see, is a more general way of stating vehicle externalism than MSB-VE or R-VE. E-VE does not attempt to give an account of the mechanisms of the individuation of mental content. Therefore E-VE, indeed, does not need to make ineliminable reference to *everything* in a mental state's minimal supervenience base. The reason why, however, is not the fact

that either E-VE or MSB-VE is true while the other is false, but simply is that E-VE and MSB-VE define vehicle externalism with different motivations. E-VE simply states that vehicle externalism must be the case based on explanatory reasons while MSB-VE and R-VE try to give account for the mechanisms of vehicle externalism. In short, MSB-VE and E-VE are not rival accounts. The case is the same for the relationship between E-VE and R-VE. It is true that E-VE does not need to appeal to the realizers of the relevant content-bearing mental state. Being a more elaborate version of MSB-VE, R-VE tries to give a precise definition of the mechanisms of the content bearing mental states and differs from E-VE in that regard. E-VE must be distinguished in that manner from the other two versions of vehicle externalism for the assessment of IP. The question of whether IP is problematic can only be answered with a theory of vehicle externalism (and also content externalism) which is formulated precisely and in detail. That is nothing like a general definition such as E-VE provides.

MSB-VE and R-VE, on the other hand, are rival accounts in the sense that they both attempt to provide the precision and the detail required for the assessment of IP. Both, however, fail to do so. In the next section, I will argue that the reason for this is that MSB-VE is not detailed enough and R-VE is lost in its terminology. When the definition and further specifications of R-VE are purified from confusions, R-VE, as the most precise definition of vehicle externalism, provides good grounds for IP.

3 A New Realization Vehicle Externalism

I agree with Sprevak and Kallestrup that MSB-VE fails to provide good grounds for IP on the direction from content externalism to vehicle externalism and that it suffices to block the entailment from vehicle externalism to content externalism. (Sprevak and Kallestrup 2014, 88) An external resource which takes a part in the minimal supervenience base of one's content bearing mental state simply does not necessarily need to have a role in the individuation of the mental content. By its definition, however, MSB-VE implicitly holds that content externalism entails vehicle externalism. As we have seen in the second section, MSB-VE holds vehicle externalism is true iff an external resource is part of the minimal supervenience base for that mental state. This requirement is also met by content externalism. For content externalism, the minimal supervenience base must include an external resource. For MSB-VE, if an external resource is part of the minimal supervenience base, then vehicle externalism is true. Hence, content externalism entails vehicle externalism and IP fails. The failure stems from the inadequate characterization of vehicle externalism by only appealing to the minimal supervenience base. Beyond defining minimal supervenience base, MSB-VE does not characterize and differentiate between the parts (internal or external) having place in the minimal supervenience base. This leads to the conclusion that content externalism entails vehicle externalism.

The type of R-VE Sprevak and Kallestrup considers is based on the works of Shoemaker (2007) and Wilson (2001). Shoemaker introduces the notions of total realizer and core realizer. A total realizer of a property, he defines, is the property whose instantiation is sufficient for the realization of that property. A core realizer of a property, on the other hand, is the "salient" part of a total realization of that property. (Shoemaker 2007, 21) Wilson's account of realization adds to this terminology by specifying the parts that play a role in a total realization in addition to the core realizers. (Wilson 2001, 8-9) He calls

these the non-core parts. Non-core part helps the core-part to play its required causal role for the total realization. Importantly, Wilson also distinguishes between the realizers of a system and the background conditions. This notion of background conditions is crucial to make sense of any theory of realization. On the base of these distinctions, Wilson defines three types of realizations; narrow realization (NR), wide realization (WR) and radically wide realization (R-WR). He defines them as follows;

“NR: It is a type of total realization whose non-core part is located within the individual having that property.

WR: It is the total realization whose non-core part is not located entirely within the individual.

R-WR: It is a type of WR whose core part is not located entirely within the individual.”

(Wilson 2001, 11)

Once this framework is set, Sprevak and Kallestrup argue that R-VE fails to block entailment either from content externalism to vehicle externalism or from vehicle externalism to content externalism. The reason why, they think, is the fact that the distinction between core and non-core realizers is what they call interest relative. (Sprevak and Kallestrup 2014, 93) As they emphasize, for this version of R-VE, the difference between content externalism and vehicle externalism becomes a matter of the difference between wide realization and radically wide realization. That is, what Wilson calls wide realization defines content externalism and what he calls radically wide realization defines vehicle externalism. If the distinction between core and non-core parts, however, is interest relative, then one cannot talk about a solid ground for IP since the distinction between wide and radically wide realization and hence the distinction between content externalism and vehicle externalism depends on the interest. IP, in that case, would become true or false depending on the explanatory context.

The second problem about that kind of R-VE is that it also fails to block entailment from vehicle externalism to content externalism. The issue is that in order for any realization to be radically wide, it should also be wide. This is required by definition since radically wide realization is defined as “a wide realization whose core part is not located entirely within the individual.” Therefore, for this version of R-VE, vehicle externalism necessarily entails content externalism and IP turns out to be false. The reason behind these problems about R- vehicle externalism, I argue, is that its elaboration hinges on vague concepts like “salient” and “non-core”.

The concept of “salient” is quite pragmatic since what is salient is salient in a particular context to a particular agent. What is meant by non-core is also not clear since even if one is able to detect the core-part of a total realization, the remainder parts are left as a unified bulk. In that sense, these two concepts are not appropriate for their job, namely, playing a part in the elaboration of R-VE. They do not only fail to totally represent the parts in realization, but they also misrepresent them. Hence, a proper and precise version of R-VE should be reformulated so as to avoid these confusions.

The first thing to dispose of is defining the core realizer as the salient part of a total realization since what becomes salient depends on the context. Therefore, the distinction between wide realization and radically wide realization cannot be drawn

based on core realizers. There is no core realizer of a property without the particular context or explanatory interest. This can be put, maybe more accurately, in that way too: all parts playing a role for the total realization are core realizers. Take the example of Sprevak and Kallestrup. A mousetrap is a total realizer of the property of catching and killing mice. If one is interested in explaining how it does the killing, some parts become salient. If one is interested in explaining how it attracts mice, some other parts seem to be the core realizers. (Sprevak and Kallestrup 2014, 93) The analogy suffices to show that how a core realizer can depend on the explanatory interest. Moreover, it also successfully shows another important point. Without the agent who is interested in explaining the particular aspects of the system, all parts of the total realizer work together to realize the property of catching and killing mice. All parts of the mousetrap are required and have the same importance for the total realization. All parts of it, then, are, in a sense, core realizers. But, although they are the same in their being core realizers, *the way they contribute to the total realization is still different*. R-VE (and other versions of vehicle externalism fail too) fails to account for this simple, obvious difference. This is the fundamental reason why they fail providing good grounds for IP.

For a total realization, then, there are no core or non-core realizers. All the parts of a total realizer act as a core realizer since they have the same importance for the total realization and they help each other to play the required causal role they need to play for a total realization. Since there is no part we can refer to as non-core, however, it does not make sense to call them core. Therefore, I will call them just “realizers”. This, however, at the first sight might seem like a complete disaster for assessing IP; when there is no core/non-core distinction, R-VE cannot offer a proper basis for making a comparison between content externalism and vehicle externalism. However, by demanding further clarification about these realizer parts, we may be able to better understand the relation between content externalism and vehicle externalism.

The required clarification is about accounting for how different realizers can contribute in different ways to the total realization. The brain, for example, has a different causal role for the total realization of a mental state with water or twater content and water or twater has a different one for the same total realization. Vehicle externalism and content externalism, in that sense, *make claims about different types of realizers*. The claim of vehicle externalism is not about the realizers which are related with the properties related to content individuation, but it is about the realizers of the property of being a mental state with content. The claim of content externalism, on the other hand, is directly related with the realizers of the content individuation.

To illustrate, consider again Putnam’s twin Earth. (Putnam, 1973) Water and twater, in that case, are substitutable for the total realization of a mental state with content. It is the case that the doppelgangers in two identical earths have the same sets of realizers except water and twater. Water, or twater, as the realizers of that particular mental state, contributes to the total realization by individuating the content. The brain, on the other hand, despite the fact that it contributes to the total realization by helping other realizers like water and twater to have the required causal role, mainly contributes to the total realization in a different manner. It plays a part as a realizer of the mental state with content, whether its content is water or twater. In other words, it plays a part as one of the realizers of the vehicle of the content. Notice that this is partly the reason why Shoemaker’s use of “salient” becomes vague. If one’s explanatory interests are in content individuating realizers, for instance, then water and twater become salient. As interests change, the different types of realizers become salient or not.

A problem seems to arise at that point. What about the seemingly irrelevant realizers of the property of catching and killing mice? What about, for example, the mouse-trap not being sucked up by a super-massive black hole while the mouse is about to be caught? Does this realizer have the same importance with the other generic realizers such as the parts of a system such as a mouse trap? In other words, are these infinitely many realizers, like the black hole would have the same importance with the other parts of the system? In that case, it seems, it would be impossible to talk about the distinction between content externalism and vehicle externalism because every single aspect of the world would have a “generic” role in the total realization of any of one’s content bearing mental state.

Wilson’s use of background conditions, I think, provides a solution to this problem. He writes;

[...]the total realization of H excludes the background conditions that are necessary for there to be the appropriate, functioning system. While these may themselves be necessary for a given entity to have H, since they are not states of S, they are no part of the total realization of H. Thus, total realizations should be distinguished from the broader circumstances in which they occur. (Wilson 2001, 9)

Still, it needs further explanation for it to work for a theory of realization of mental properties where there is no distinction between core and non-core realizers since when there is no such distinction, it may appear that there is no healthy criterion to distinguish between the system’s own realizers and the background conditions. I think this view is simply false. Talking about non-hierarchical generic realizers does not make one necessarily unable to distinguish between the realizers of a system and the background conditions. This conviction stems from the view that if one is to talk about a system, it must necessarily be a result of an explanatory interest. This is, however, not the case. One picks systems anytime in ordinary life without any explanatory interest. We ordinarily identify a sparrow, a ship, a rock, a mousetrap etc. This, of course, is related to how one’s sensory and perceptual apparatus is shaped, but this is irrelevant for our subject since their level of veridicality is more of an epistemological problem. Here, it suffices to state that the identified systems are obviously in contrast with the background conditions that make their existence possible. Indeed, this contrast is the very reason why one can make sense of things around and within.

Hence, explanatory interest and saliency enter into picture when a particular system has already been identified. My following definition of wide and radically-wide realization offers a solution based on this; systems (cognitive systems for our concern) are identified before the explanatory interest and the related saliency arise. Therefore, systems and their states are de facto distinguishable from the background conditions which make the realization of a system possible to occur.

Then, there is a distinction between interest-dependency and subject-dependency. In the case of generic realizers, systems are obviously distinct from background conditions indifferent of interest-dependency but they are subject-dependent in the sense that they are identified depending on the sensory apparatus and cognitive abilities of the subject. However, as I pointed out, this is, as long as it is not interest-dependent in an explanatory context, irrelevant to our topic. In my account, systems and their properties that are defined through a theory of realization where every realizer that has the same importance does not need to suffer from interest-dependency. System’s realizers and

the background conditions can be kept distinct safely. The black hole example falls into the category of background conditions. What is more, only after a system is identified, do core and non-core realizers enter into the picture. That is, the realizers in question are ipso facto the realizers of the already identified system.

There are, then, different kinds of realizers for a cognitive system to have content bearing mental states. Two major ones are the realizers of the properties of vehicle of content such as brain and the realizers of properties of content such as water or arthritis. They, by working together, lead to the total realization of having a content bearing mental state. In this formulation of realization, narrow realization, wide realization and radically wide realization are defined as follows;

NR: Realizers are located entirely within the individual having the realized property.

WR: Realizers of the properties related to content individuation are not located entirely within the individual.

R-WR: Realizers of the properties related to vehicle of content are not located entirely within the individual.

So, according to this new type of realization;

Content externalism is true iff the property of having a content bearing mental state is widely realized

And,

Vehicle externalism is true iff the property of having a content bearing mental state is radically widely realized.

IP, here, is no more in trouble, neither from content externalism to vehicle externalism, nor from vehicle externalism to content externalism. One can be a proponent of vehicle internalism and content externalism together. It is possible for the total realization of a content bearing mental state to have content individuation realizers external and realizers of vehicle of content internal to the body, and vice versa.

4 Conclusion

Sprevak and Kallestrup challenged the general assumption that content externalism and vehicle externalism are independent. They argued that for various forms of vehicle externalism, IP does not hold. I argued that the problem about IP is about the level of precision of a possible account of vehicle externalism. I have demonstrated that all the forms of vehicle externalism Sprevak and Kallestrup analyze lacked that precision. R-VE, however, when reformulated to include a precise and detailed theory of realization manages to provide solid grounds for IP. Specifications and clarifications made on the work of Shoemaker (2007) and Wilson (2001) can provide a clear statement of vehicle externalism, which includes a solid grounding of IP.

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