AN ARGUMENT FOR THE INCONSISTENCY OF CONTENT EXTERNALISM AND EPISTEMIC INTERNALISM

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I
Whereas a number of recent articles have focussed upon whether the thesis of content externalism is compatible with a certain sort of knowledge that is gained via first-person authority, far less attention has been given to the relationship that this thesis bears to the possession of knowledge in general and, in particular, its relation to internalist and externalist epistemologies. Nevertheless, although very few actual arguments have been presented to this end, there does seem to be a shared suspicion that content externalism must be incompatible with epistemic internalism. In a recent and influential paper, however, James Chase has challenged this conventional wisdom by offering a subtle defence of the view that content externalism and epistemic internalism are, in fact, compatible after all. Our aim here is twofold. First, to show that Chase is only able to achieve this result because he focuses upon the internalist conception of justification, rather than knowledge. Second, to formulate one prima facie argument which shows that an internalist conception of knowledge is incompatible with an externalist conception of content, an argument which, moreover, is not touched by Chase’s remarks.

II
For the purposes of this paper we will characterise content externalism as constituted, at least minimally, by the following thesis:
Content Externalism (CE)
The contents of an agent’s, a’s, mental states fail to supervene upon a’s intrinsic physical properties.

We take CE to be supported by the standard ‘Twin-Earth’ arguments. If an agent’s mental contents did always supervene upon her intrinsic properties, then she would share mental contents with her doppelgänger on twin-earth. But the Twin-Earth arguments purport to show that such internal physical duplicates might have different mental properties - i.e., that different De Dicto belief ascriptions might be true of these agents. Accordingly, the issue of what mental content an agent entertains need not be solely decided by that agent’s intrinsic physical constitution. Instead, it may also depend upon which physical or social environment the agent is embedded in.

For example, in the Twin-Earth scenario that Hilary Putnam describes, an agent on earth and her doppelgänger on twin-earth both assent to ‘water is wet’ even though their different micro-physical surroundings make it the case that the agent on earth believes that water is wet while her twin-earth doppelgänger believes that twin-water is wet. Indeed, not only will doppelgängers within the same possible world fail to share mental properties (where twin-earth is taken as a remote place in the actual world), but the same fate will also befall doppelgängers across possible worlds (where twin-earth is taken as a counterfactual possible world). The notion of supervenience denied in CE is thus weak supervenience: necessarily, if a and a* are physical duplicates, then a and a* are mental duplicates. One need not go to another possible world in order to establish the existence of externalist content.

III
Epistemic internalism, on the other hand, will here be understood as constituted, again at least minimally, by the following thesis:

Epistemic Internalism about Knowledge (EIK)
A necessary condition of an agent’s, a’s, knowledge of a proposition, φ,