

Denying the content–vehicle distinction: a response to ‘The New Mind Revisited’

Riccardo Manzotti · Robert Pepperell

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Author *A* makes a number of objections to our paper, the most important of which are:

1. That we conflate the distinction between content and vehicle externalism,
2. That there are consequences in so doing,
3. That we obfuscate the differences between externalist views of various strengths,
4. That our claims about the New Mind are, therefore, undermined.

We are grateful to *A* for raising the issue of the distinction between mental contents and vehicles as it allows us the opportunity to be specific about something we acknowledge we left implicit in our paper. *A* is right to assert that we conflate mental contents and vehicles. In fact, we go further, and claim such contents and vehicles are in fact *identical*. That we reject the distinction between mental contents and vehicles and assert their identity is one of the reasons our proposals about the New Mind can claim to be new.

Before adding a little more flesh to that claim, it is worth saying that we do not offer the New Mind as a complete and monolithic description of consciousness. Our paper outlines a developing hypothesis that, if validated, would have far reaching implications for the way we understand

that nature of the mind. It would require a departure from centuries of engrained assumptions and beliefs. However, of course, much work remains to be done before such an ambitious hypothesis could be articulated to the same degree as other long-established views.

In one sense, the New Mind serves as a kind of umbrella term sheltering a family of views, all of which deny in one form or another the necessity of locating the mind solely in the head. Many authors have advanced such positions (Biro 1996; Chemero 2009; Clark and Chalmers 1998; Clark 2008; Holt 1914; Honderich 2004; Hurley 1998; Lycan 2002; Noë 2009; O’Regan and Noë 2001; Rockwell 2005; Rowlands 2011; Tonneau 2004; Varela et al. 1991). Both proponents of the New Mind have elsewhere outlined varying versions of the thesis (Manzotti 2006, 2011a, b; Pepperell 1995/2003, 2005).

In another sense, as *A* rightly identifies, the New Mind thesis goes beyond previous extended mind theories and externalist views (such as content externalism), in particular by asserting the distributed, or ‘spread out,’ properties of consciousness itself and not just cognitive processes or semantic content. Hence, the New Mind thesis is a somewhat more radical proposition than other similar views in that it challenges even some of the assumptions held by fellow externalists, not least the existence of the content–vehicle distinction we address here.

It may come as a surprise to many that we explicitly assert the *identity* between content and vehicles. We do so for three main reasons: first, we doubt there is any empirical evidence to support the assumption that they are separate. Second, because such a separation merely perpetuates an anachronistically dualistic picture of reality. And third, because perpetuating the distinction hinders rather than helps the task of understanding the nature of that reality.

R. Manzotti
Institute of Consumption, Communication and Behavior,
IULM University, Via Carlo Bo, 8, 16033 Milan, Italy
e-mail: riccardo.manzotti@gmail.com

R. Pepperell (✉)
Cardiff School of Art & Design, Howard Gardens,
Cardiff CF24 0SP, UK
e-mail: rpepperell@cardiffmet.ac.uk

So, are there necessary grounds for maintaining the distinction between contents and vehicles? We are aware of the long philosophical history that distinctions between mental and physical phenomena have enjoyed—whether in the form of the mind/body distinction, the spirit/matter distinction, the mental/physical distinction, the represented/representation distinction, the subject/object distinction, among many others. For *A*, the nature of mental vehicles, and thus their separation from mental content, is an empirical matter rather than a terminological one. Yet, as mentioned above, we wonder where the empirical evidence is for this distinction existing anywhere other than the minds of those who believe in it?

In the absence of any clear explanation for the physical basis of the mind (we know of none in the available literature) how is it possible to identify what contents are as opposed to vehicles? Are these not theoretical categories that have, by sleight of hand, turned into supposed facts? Of course, lack of evidence for the existence of something is not proof that it doesn't exist. But neither does it bode well for any argument that takes its existence as a premise. In fact, whether or not it is an empirical matter, we find in principle the idea that mental content can be distinguished from mental vehicles not only unconvincing but downright implausible; it is no different in essence from the belief among certain mystical thinkers in an immaterial spirit realm untethered from the coarse world of matter. The same applies to the supposed separation between the represented and representation, which again is frequently posited and endlessly debated. There are vast tracts of literature devoted to analyzing such distinctions in fine detail, yet few people seem to have taken the precaution of establishing beyond doubt their necessity.

It's worthwhile noting briefly some of the reasons often given for distinguishing between mind and physical reality (the basic dualism being posited by *A* in the form of the content–vehicle distinction). Two of the most common are the argument from illusion and, what we'll call here, the 'arbitrary representation' argument. The first states that since we can often be mistaken about what is in the world, for example, when we misconstrue something's properties because we are fooled by an illusion, then our mental states must somehow be independent of the physical states. A common variant of the argument from illusion is the 'argument from dreams or hallucinations,' which uses other apparent differences between supposedly mental and physical states as proof of the autonomy of the former. The second argument takes it that because the connections between representations and what they represent can be arbitrary—the model we have of the solar system need not be as big as the solar system itself—the representation and what is being represented are mutually independent. Space here does not allow fuller refutations of these arguments

(see Manzotti 2011a) but suffice to say that we think neither hold true.

Consider Hinton's Lilac Chaser (www.michaelbach.de/ot/col_lilacChaser/, Zaidi et al. 2012). You look at what appears to be a circle of purplish disks, but, after a few moments, you will actually perceive a rotating green spot! Does this show there is a separate mental and physical realm or, in more respectably cognitive terms, that there is represented content that does not match with the represented object? Such a conclusion certainly holds if you set out with the distinction as a premise. But other explanations based on the identity between contents and vehicles are equally plausible (see Manzotti 2011a, b). In any case, the problem remains of how one might access the 'physical' reality in order to verify the purplishness without becoming mentally involved with it in some way. It is now widely recognized there can be no observer-independent account of color (Byrne and Hilbert 2003). As for the arguments from dreams or hallucinations, they do not show the mind exists independently from physical reality any more than the argument from illusion. Dreams are closer to the perception of reality than is commonly assumed, and their basic building blocks seem to be always the result of direct acquaintance with the physical world (Bulkeley 2009; da Silva and Fernando 2003; Murzyn 2008). My fantasies about Tolkien's Middle Earth, or my drug-induced apparitions of twelve-headed lions may be fanciful, but are surely grounded in my previous experience of reality, which scientists who have studied perception often refer to as a 'controlled hallucination' (Koenderink 2011). If perhaps different in character, why are such hallucinations different in kind from my mistaking a bag in the corner of a room for my cat, or for that matter the green color for the purplish color in the case cited above?

As for the arbitrary link between representations and what they represent, it would be worth asking what would a representation of the solar system look like if the solar system had never existed. The question is, in a way, nonsensical because the representation is simply one aspect of what constitutes the object being represented, when that object is taken as a whole (see Pepperell 2011). We take the view that representation and represented are both but parts of a larger phenomenon, that of the representational experience itself, which cannot endure in the absence of either of its constituents. One can, of course, decompose any entity and prise apart its aspects for the purpose of discourse or analysis; but one must always beware that such decomposition is theoretical and the resulting distinctions should not surreptitiously acquire the status of fact.

Understandable doubts might remain about the move we are making here. After all, are we not simply making an error about which every student of cognitive science and

philosophy of mind has been warned, namely ‘... confusedly superimposing two different spaces: the representing space and the represented space,’ as in the example cited by Dennett and Kinsbourne (1992)? Are we not conflating the map with the terrain? In brief, yes we are, on the grounds that what constitutes the terrain in its fullest sense is not merely the land itself but our knowledge and awareness of it, without which the terrain would have no existence for us at all.

A says we have ‘... confused factors that causally *contribute* to cognition with factors that *constitute* cognition [...]. Granted ... 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.’ This cuts to the heart of the issue and is perhaps the major point of disagreement between ourselves and A, and indeed, one of the ways in which the New Mind thesis differs from other comparable positions. As we have already noted above, we explicitly argue that *contribution* necessitates *constitution*, if the phenomenon in question is taken as a whole. In our view, while we accept the factors contributing to a process might be separated from those that constitute it for the purposes of analysis or discussion, it really is a mistake to regard them as ontologically separate, as many of those wedded to perpetuating dualism do.

We also reject the necessity of the content/vehicle distinction, and other similar distinctions, because of the explanatory benefits such rejection yields. The greatest of these benefits, in our view, is the much simpler account of the relationship between mind and world that emerges in contrast to those many views bedeviled by dubious distinctions of various kinds. In short, the mind and world are *identical*, not divorced realms that necessitate endless inquiry into how they might (or might not) be related. Because the mind and world are identical, so mental content and mental vehicles are identical, as are represented and representations, and all the other similar dualities.

This ontological economy means there is no longer any need to posit discrete or multiple levels of reality and explain how they interact. In terms of understanding perception, we are no longer plagued by the problem of how to separate the object as perceived from the object itself, since they are parts of the same thing. Nor are we any longer compelled to seek physical causes for mental phenomena—a quest that has frustrated neuroscience for decades now. There are no physical causes of mental phenomena, because one does not arise from the other. The New Mind requires the discovery of no new property of reality, or hitherto undetected force, to explain how the mind and world relate.

The same does not seem to be true of the position advocated by A, according to which the vehicle is the material or physical machinery (in the case of the brain the

neurochemical ‘machinery’) that enables mental states but does not in itself constitute those states. This as noted merely reasserts the age-old mind–matter distinction, which has been responsible for so much perplexity in the philosophy of mind (how do neurons give rise to consciousness, etc.?) and locates mental content somehow beyond the machinery. What is this extra something, other than the ghost in the machine, and has it ever been observed? Certainly no neuroscientist we are aware of has reported seeing anything like it among neurons, despite all the intimate probing that has been going on into brains over many years.

I make a mark on a blackboard; I observe a neuron firing. In either case, where exactly is the ‘content’ and how is it unambiguously distinguished from its vehicle? Can A offer any robust account of what this content might be so that we can locate it? No, instead we are offered that ‘... contents are what thoughts, beliefs, desires, perceptions, etc. are made of.’ Whether they are ‘made of’ some imponderable non-physical substance or of the same fabric that everything else in the universe is made of is the issue at stake here.

Any serious attempt to naturalize the conscious mind cannot avoid this issue. Mental content is either something that is part of the world or something that exists outside the world. It is clear from the study of neurons so far that they bear no resemblance to the experiences they are supposed to generate. Rather than attributing all human experience to those neurons alone (A is equivocal about whether to limit mental states to the head or body, or what A calls the ‘nervous system’), it is more logical to accept that the content we have about the world *is identical with the world itself*. The New Mind offers a way of reconciling the structure of our experience together with the structure of the natural world. In this respect, as noted by A, we share some of the intuitions of Russellian monism; the content–vehicle distinction merely stands in the way of any attempt to naturalize the conscious mind.

It is important to stress here we do mean the *conscious* mind, not a conveniently restricted subset of the mind such as ‘belief,’ or ‘cognition,’ that might appear less tricky to define. Too often, in our view, the problem of conscious mind has been deferred to a seemingly more manageable discussion about a limited subset of the mind, and to some extent, this has characterized much of the recent debates about extended mind (Adams and Aizawa 2009; Clark 2008; Robbins and Aydede 2009; Rupert 2004, 2009; Wilson 2004). This has left the larger problem of where consciousness itself might be largely untouched (see Pepperell 2012).

We hope now it is clear why the New Mind, as we describe it, is really a departure from other forms of externalism, such as theories of mind extended by

technology. Because the world and our experience of the world amount to the same thing, there are no grounds for confining that experience (by which we mean consciousness itself) to anywhere other than the world. Where there is world there is mind, and where there is mind there is world. This is not naïve realism. We do not suggest, as realists of various kinds do, that the ‘internal’ contents of the mind match exactly the ‘external’ contents of the world. This is simply to reassert another form of dualism, with no empirical foundation.

Our responses to the substance of A’s objections are these: We accept we are conflating mental content and vehicles, for the reasons given above. We accept, also, that there are consequences in doing this. In our view, these consequences are beneficial in helping us better understand the nature of the conscious mind and the world we experience. We welcome the opportunity afforded by A’s paper to clarify a point that distinguished the New Mind thesis from other forms of extended mind theory which also rest on this supposed distinction. But we do not agree that A’s objections undermine the New Mind thesis as a presented. If the price of conflating content and vehicles is to rid us of a spurious distinction that has dogged our attempts to understand the conscious mind for decades, and perhaps in one form or another for centuries, then we think it is a price worth paying.

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