

# Is Internalism About Knowledge Consistent with Content Externalism?

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**Abstract** There is widespread suspicion that there is a principled conflict between epistemic internalism and content externalism (or anti-individualism). Despite the prominence of this suspicion, it has rarely been substantiated by explicit arguments. However, Duncan Pritchard and Jesper Kallestrup have recently provided a *prima facie* argument concluding that internalism about knowledge and externalism about content are incompatible. I criticize the incompatibilist argument and conclude that the purported incompatibility is, at best, *prima facie*. This is, in part, because several steps in the argument are faulty and, in part, because there are promising responses available to the compatibilists.

**Keywords** Anti-individualism · Internalism · Externalism

## A Tale of Two Internalism–Externalism Debates

The relations between the internalism–externalism dispute in epistemology and the internalism–externalism dispute in philosophy of mind are poorly understood. Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, there is a widespread suspicion that there is a principled conflict between epistemic internalism and content externalism (or anti-individualism). Jessica Brown characterizes the widely received view as follows:

“...it seems likely that many anti-individualists who hold that thought partly depends on the world would also adopt externalist epistemologies according to which one’s epistemic state depends partly on the world. (Brown 2004, p 251)

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Brown's remark is not intended to be an incompatibilist argument on behalf of the 'many anti-individualists'.<sup>1</sup> It merely notes that there is a widely held, or presupposed, view that externalism about the mental generally goes together with epistemic externalism. Despite the prominence of the view that content externalism is, somehow, in tension with epistemic internalism, it has rarely occurred as the conclusion of an argument.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it has rarely been made clear wherein the alleged tension lies.

It is therefore refreshing that Jesper Kallestrup and Duncan Pritchard provide an explicit *prima facie* argument to the conclusion that internalism about knowledge is inconsistent with content externalism (Kallestrup and Pritchard 2004).<sup>3</sup> It is worth emphasizing that their argument is not merely meant to solely concern self-knowledge and other types of knowledge gained by first-person authority. Rather, Kallestrup and Pritchard claims that the argument "...bears on the possession of knowledge in general." (Kallestrup and Pritchard 2004, p 345).

Consequently, the argument is of considerable interest. For if its conclusion is not merely *prima facie* correct, but correct altogether, a remarkable novel argumentative strategy will be available to theorists of mind and knowledge, respectively. If knowledge internalism could be established, content externalism could thereby be refuted and vice versa. In each case, one major program in a core discipline of philosophy would directly refute another major program in a distinct core discipline. So, the incompatibilist argument deserves consideration. If its conclusion is not *merely* *prima facie* correct, then at least one of two grand programs in two core disciplines of philosophy is mistaken.

## The Theories in Question

Both internalism about knowledge and externalism about representational states and their contents may be conceived of in many ways. Therefore, I begin by briefly considering Kallestrup and Pritchard's characterizations of the theories argued to be incompatible and noting a few features of them. With those features in mind, I proceed to address the incompatibilist argument.

<sup>1</sup>Brown, in conversation. Note that Brown discusses *anti-individualism* which, according to Tyler Burge, is a thesis about the nature of representational mental states (Burge 2007, et passim, see, e.g., the Introduction p 3). Kallestrup and Pritchard discuss *content externalism* which is a thesis about the contents of representational states. The two theses are intimately connected. Since I address the argument by Kallestrup and Pritchard, I follow them in focusing on content externalism.

<sup>2</sup>A notable exception is (Bonjour 1992). Bonjour's incompatibilist argument is criticized by James Chase (Chase 2001) who is, in turn, criticized by Anthony Brueckner (2001). Kallestrup and Pritchard cite Bonjour's article as inspiration and claim that their incompatibilist argument "...is not touched by Chase's remarks." (Kallestrup and Pritchard 2004, p 345). Jessica Brown has an interesting discussion of related matters in (Brown 2007). These authors focus on epistemic internalism about justification rather than knowledge. While this is, in many ways, a more natural approach, the ensuing discussion will concern the incompatibilist argument regarding internalism about knowledge.

<sup>3</sup>I will first address the argument as it stands and then discuss the qualification that it is *prima facie*.

Kallestrup and Pritchard consider a version of internalism about knowledge, EIK, which is characterized as follows:

*EIK: A necessary condition on an agent, S's, knowledge of a proposition, p, is that all the epistemic factors relevant to S's knowledge (as opposed to merely true belief) that p are reflectively accessible to S.*

The notion of 'reflective accessibility' is not explicitly characterized. I shall regard EIK as an internalist constraint on knowledge which is weak in the sense that it only requires that the agent has the ability to 'reflectively access' the factors in question. A strong constraint, in contrast, requires the exercise of this ability.<sup>4</sup> Note that Kallestrup and Pritchard also use the notion of 'reflective determination'.<sup>5</sup> I think that the two notions are used interchangeably since the former is used in EIK whereas the latter is used in the incompatibilist argument which purports to target EIK.

Kallestrup and Pritchard argue that since EIK merely sets forth a necessary condition on knowledge, it allows for further external conditions. Presumably, it is relevant for S's knowledge whether such conditions are met. So, by EIK, such external conditions must be reflectively accessible to S. For example, it is relevant for S's knowledge that S is not in a Gettier-case. Perhaps it is also relevant for S's knowledge that p that S is not a BIV\*.<sup>6</sup> But, if so, EIK requires that S may reflectively determine that such external conditions on knowledge are met. As we shall see, the argument relies on this assumption.

However, virtually every post-Gettier knowledge-internalist rejects the rather extreme view that *all* the epistemically relevant factors which constitute knowledge must be reflectively accessible to the knower. Richard Feldman makes this point very clearly with regards to the infamous fourth condition that S is not in a Gettier-case:

Ever since Gettier, internalists have denied that what is needed for knowledge beyond true belief is just something internal. They have thought there is some condition needed to deal with the Gettier problem, and this condition, whatever it is, will not be a purely internal matter... ..Thus, internalists think that justification is an internal matter and is necessary for knowledge, but they deny that only internal factors are needed to differentiate true beliefs that are knowledge from true beliefs that are not. (Feldman 2004).<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, internalists about knowledge typically assume that the fact that one is not a BIV\* is a purely external condition on knowledge. If so, S need *not* be able to

<sup>4</sup>See (Bonjour 1992) for more on the weak–strong distinction.

<sup>5</sup>The notion of 'reflective *determination*' might suggest that the constraint is factive. But I doubt this is Kallestrup and Pritchard's intention. Kallestrup and Pritchard do not discuss whether 'reflective access' is merely doxastic (i.e., consists in the ability to generate *beliefs* about the factors in question) or epistemic (i.e., consists in the ability to generate *warranted beliefs* about those factors).

<sup>6</sup>A BIV\* is characterized as a brain-in-a-vat which has never had any causal connection to water either directly or indirectly.

<sup>7</sup>Feldman is a mentalist-internalist rather than an accessibilist-internalist (see Feldman and Conee 2001). But the point in question is perfectly general.

‘reflectively determine’ that she is not a BIV\*. So, perhaps, we should reformulate internalism about knowledge, (IK), as follows:

**IK:** *S knows that p only if S is justified in believing that p in a way such that all the epistemic factors relevant to S’s justification in the belief that p are reflectively accessible to S.*

The idea underlying IK is that the source and nature of the justification must be somehow available to an internalist knower. Interestingly, IK is strong enough to rule out that Bonjour’s infamous reliable clairvoyants have (internalist) knowledge.<sup>8</sup> For they lack reflective access to the fact that a certain subset of their beliefs are generated by a reliable faculty. The difference between EIK and IK is considerable. The former seems to require, whereas the latter does not, that S may reflectively determine whether all *further* necessary conditions on knowledge that p are met (except the condition that p is true).

The version of content externalism which Kallestrup and Pritchard consider is characterized, minimally, as follows:

**CE:** *The contents of an agent’s, S’s, mental states fail to supervene on S’s intrinsic physical properties.*

This characterization may be too minimal. Given the assumption that phenomenal states are multiply realizable, CE is compatible with a view according to which representational states and their contents are individuated solely by their phenomenal character. If phenomenal states are multiply realizable, then two agents who are in type-identical phenomenal states could be in type-distinct intrinsic physical states. If so, a theorist could argue that two persons with type-identical intrinsic physical properties might differ in their representational contents. This would be to accept CE. Nevertheless, the theorist could insist that the difference in representational contents is due to phenomenological differences between the persons. So, she could reject that the difference in representational contents is partly due to the fact that the two agents are related to distinct environments. So, such a theorist would subscribe to content-*internalism* although she accepts CE. Similarly, a radical dualist who thinks that mental states and their contents are entirely non-physical could use this assumption as a basis for accepting CE. But it appears to be consistent with such a radical dualism to uphold the view that the states and their contents are not partly environmentally individuated. If so, there is a radical dualist-*internalist* position which is consistent with the acceptance of CE.

I regard these views as implausible and mention them only for orientation. However, the fact that they are possibilities in ‘philosophical space’ suggests that CE may not be sufficiently strong to capture content externalism. Indeed, it might capture certain versions of content internalism as well. However, this is not a problem for the incompatibilist argument. In a sense, it makes the argument stronger since it applies to a wide range of theories about content individuation. The

<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., (Bonjour 1985, pp 41–45). I regard the clairvoyants as possessing externalist knowledge because I subscribe to pluralism about knowledge. This is the view that there are both internalist and externalist kinds of knowledge. Now that I am at it, let me also note that I doubt that the epistemological internalism–externalism distinction is best drawn by an ‘accessibilist criterion.’

important point is, as Kallestrup and Pritchard correctly note, that it applies to paradigm versions of content externalism.<sup>9</sup>

### The Incompatibilist Argument and Its Problems

Kallestrup and Pritchard formulate the incompatibilist argument from EIK and CE as follows:

1. Given CE, if one knows the content of one's thought that water is wet, then one must not be a BIV\*.

Hence:

- 1\*. A relevant factor to one's knowledge that one is thinking that water is wet is that one is not a BIV\*.
2. Given EIK, if one knows the content of one's thought that water is wet, then one must be able to reflectively determine that one is not a BIV\*.

But:

3. It is impossible to reflectively determine that one is not a BIV\*.

Hence:

- (c) It is impossible to know the content of one's thought that water is wet.

Kallestrup and Pritchard refer to the argument as a *reductio* (ibid. pp 349 and 351). The idea is that since the conclusion is false, CE or EIK must be false.

Each of the premises, some of the steps as well as the conclusion of the incompatibilist argument deserve consideration. I shall first raise three main objections to the argument. Then I shall consider the scope of the argument and a putative worry. Finally, I mention a way in which a compatibilist might attempt to respond.

First, the conditional of 1 is not entailed by CE alone. CE is just the denial of a supervenience thesis. So, it does not by itself require that the subject, S, must have been in direct or indirect causal contact with water to think water thoughts (and hence to know anything about water). Such a causal contact requirement could contribute to an explanation of why CE is true. But the stronger causal contact requirement is the relevant externalist thesis which is relied on in 1 – not the minimalist CE.

Second, 1\* is not entailed by 1 alone. Rather, 1\* appears to be a self-standing premise which is at best partly motivated by considerations about CE or 1 along with further assumptions. Kallestrup and Pritchard consider an internalist response to 1\* which consists in subscribing to a Relevant Alternatives' (henceforth; RA) theory of

<sup>9</sup>However, Tyler Burge has considered a view according to which supervenience holds for certain representational states but in which anti-individualism is nevertheless true of them. He regards the view 'metaphysically unattractive' and notes it only to point out "...that there is a notational difference between the doctrines of local supervenience-failure and anti-individualism" (Burge 2003, p372). As noted, Burge's anti-individualism is primarily about the representational states whereas Kallestrup and Pritchard are concerned with the contents of such states.

knowledge. But an RA theory is assumed – without argument – to be “...essentially allied to an *externalist* epistemology.” (ibid. footnote 13). Arguably, this assumption is mistaken. Consider an internalist who (as Kallestrup and Pritchard suppose) thinks that the kind of justification necessary for knowledge that *p* consists in the ability to ‘reflectively determine’ that alternatives inconsistent with knowledge that *p* are false. It does not appear to be incompatible with this position that one need not be able to reflectively determine that *every* alternative to knowledge that *p* is false. Nothing essential to epistemic internalism requires that irrelevant alternatives must be considered. Specifically, EIK does not entail that epistemically *irrelevant* alternatives – such as, I suppose, the BIV\* hypothesis – must be reflectively determined to be false. In fact, it would seem that EIK is itself an RA theory of knowledge. Recall it requires is that ‘...all the epistemic factors *relevant* to S’s knowledge that *p* are reflectively accessible to S’. Hence, it seems that an RA epistemology is compatible with – even quite demanding – versions of knowledge-internalism such as EIK. At any rate, no reasons, not even *prima facie* ones, have been given to suspect that knowledge internalism in general, or EIK in particular, are incompatible with an RA epistemology.

Third, knowledge internalists who do reject an RA theory of knowledge may reject, instead, the transition from 1\* to 2 by rejecting EIK in favor of IK. According to IK, it is not the case that *all* conditions relevant to S’s knowledge (beyond the truth-condition) need to be reflectively determined to be true by S. And it is plausible that the fact that S is not a BIV\* is exempt from the reflective determination requirement even though it is relevant to S’s knowledge. According to IK, it might suffice that S is not in fact a BIV\* (or another knowledge-defeating circumstance) and that S is internally justified in her belief that water is wet.

Those are the three main objections to the argument. However, it is worthwhile to briefly mention a few supplementary considerations.

A fourth worry pertains to the scope of the argument. To articulate the worry a terminological caveat must be addressed. The phrase ‘one knows the content of one’s thought that water is wet’ which occurs in 2 and (c) may be taken in two distinct manners: It is naturally taken to mean ‘one’s knowledge that one thinks that water is wet’. Thus understood it concerns self-knowledge – knowledge about one’s own mental states and/or their contents. Moreover, in their informal presentation of the argument Kallestrup and Pritchard state the conclusion as follows: “...it is *impossible* for an agent to know that she is having a thought that water is wet.” This is hard to interpret as anything but a conclusion about self-knowledge. But, if so, the argument would, at best, show that content-externalism is incompatible with internalism about *self*-knowledge. This conclusion would be interesting. But it would fail to establish (even *prima facie*) that internalistically constrained ‘knowledge possession in general’ is incompatible with content externalism. Thus, a response would remain open to a pluralist about knowledge who holds that there are both internalist and externalist kinds of knowledge. She could argue that while self-knowledge is externalist in kind, some or all ordinary knowledge is internalist in kind.

However, the locution ‘one knows the content of one’s thought that water is wet’ occurring in 2 and (c) may also be taken to mean ‘one’s knowledge that water is wet’. That is, ‘one knows the content of one’s thought’ could be understood as ‘the content of one’s thought amounts to knowledge’. This interpretation would fit

Kallestrup and Pritchard's initial claim that the argument concerns 'knowledge possession in general' (ibid. p 345. See also p347). In any case, it is worth examining the argument for the more ambitious incompatibilist conclusion. To do so the argument may be restated according to the understanding of 'one knows the content of one's thought that water is wet' as 'one's knowledge that water is wet' in 2 and (c). I'll restate the argument from 1\* and label the restated premises 2\* and (c\*).

- 1\*. A relevant factor to one's knowledge that one is thinking that water is wet is that one is not a BIV\*.
- 2\*. Given EIK, if one knows that water is wet, then one must be able to reflectively determine that one is not a BIV\*.
3. It is impossible to reflectively determine that one is not a BIV\*.
- (c\*) It is impossible to know that water is wet

Here (c\*) concerns ordinary knowledge and not merely self-knowledge. However, on this construal of the argument, the transition from 1\* to 2\* is faulty. It is faulty even if we consider only internalists who both reject an RA theory of knowledge and accept EIK. This is because 2\* sets forth a necessary condition on *ordinary knowledge* that water is wet conditionally on EIK. In contrast, 1\* sets forth a necessary condition on *self-knowledge* that one is thinking that water is wet. So, the inference from 1\* to 2\* requires a further premise. It is not altogether clear how to best articulate the premise required for the ambitious incompatibilist argument. But note that if self-knowledge that one is thinking that p is a necessary condition on ordinary knowledge that p, then every necessary condition on self knowledge would be a necessary condition on ordinary knowledge. So, perhaps, a premise such as the following could be invoked:

- 1\*\*. One knows that water is wet *only if* one knows that one is thinking that water is wet.

However, nothing like 1\*\* is entailed by CE alone. So, whether 2\* is true appears to have little to do with whether CE is true. If so, the ambitious version of the incompatibilist argument requires that the knowledge internalist is independently committed to 2\* or to a premise such as 1\*\*. But 2\* is not entailed by EIK alone. Moreover, both RA-theorists and knowledge internalists who accept IK over EIK should reject 2\*. Perhaps, there is a line of reasoning from EIK to 1\*\*. <sup>10</sup> But 1\*\* appears to be an implausibly demanding constraint on ordinary knowledge. So, if there is an argument from EIK to 1\*\*, then it might be taken to provide yet a reason to abandon EIK in favor of IK. However, the key point is that CE does not entail that any version of internalism about knowledge possession in general is committed to 1\*\* or 2\*. If so, the ambitious argument would not be an *incompatibilist* argument.

The fourth worry may be summed up as follows. Either the conclusion of the argument concerns only internalist self-knowledge or to internalist knowledge possession in general. In the former case, the scope of the argument is very limited. In the latter case, the argument requires yet a contentious premise.

<sup>10</sup>Thanks to Matt Lockard for bringing up this suggestion.



Fifth and finally, it is worth noting that a knowledge internalist might attempt to reject 3 via a (transcendental?) argument concluding that one is not a BIV\*.<sup>11</sup> Presumably, the conclusion of such an argument would be ‘determined reflectively’. So, it would be shown that it is false that one cannot warrant by reflection that the BIV\* possibility is false. However, dialectically speaking, the onus is on the knowledge-internalist to provide a cogent transcendental argument against 3.

## Dialectical Assessment

I have simply raised some responses to, and putative problems with, the incompatibilist argument. However, Kallestrup and Pritchard emphasize that they only provide a *prima facie* incompatibilist argument. This emphasis introduces dialectical delicacies. Let me briefly address some of them.

Kallestrup and Pritchard do not specify what they mean by a *prima facie* argument. Nor do they explain wherein such arguments differ from ordinary philosophical arguments. What they mean depends on the scope of ‘*prima facie*’. We may distinguish an argument which provides a conclusion that *prima facie* p from one which provides a *prima facie* conclusion that p.

Let us consider the first conception. One could take a *prima facie* argument for p to be an argument which concludes that *prima facie* p. If so, the subject matter of the argument would be the appearance of p rather than the reality of p. In various contexts such an argument is very worthwhile. In moral psychology, for example, it may be important whether some deontic proposition (perhaps one which is argued to be false) appears to be true at first glance. But it is hardly Kallestrup and Pritchard’s argumentative goal to argue that the incompatibility in question appears to be true at first glance. So, I shall dismiss this way of understanding the notion of a *prima facie* argument.

Let us, therefore, consider the second conception of a *prima facie* argument. It is natural to take such an argument to be one which concludes *prima facie*, as opposed to conclusively, that so-and-so. Given such an understanding, Kallestrup and Pritchard may be taken to conclude that it is rational to assume, as a working-hypothesis, that the doctrines in question are inconsistent. The qualification that this is a *prima facie* conclusion may be taken to consist in an appropriate recognition of the fact that the argument is inconclusive. I think it is far more charitable to regard Kallestrup and Pritchard as purporting to provide such an inconclusive argument about *incompatibility* rather than a conclusive argument about *the appearance of incompatibility*. However, if the argument is purported to provide a rational, albeit inconclusive, basis for assuming incompatibilism, it is severely compromised by at least the former three of the five points mentioned above.

The first and the second points are dialectically important since they pertain to the validity of the argument. If these points are correct, the purportedly deductive argument is invalid as stated. If so, it hardly provides *prima facie* reason to assume incompatibility between CE and EIK.

<sup>11</sup>Fun fact: Some such arguments rely essentially on content externalism (or anti-individualism).



More substantively, the first point is important because it suggests that a *prima facie* incompatibilist argument requires a version of content externalism which is stronger than CE. The second point is not merely that 1 does not entail 1\*. The point is, moreover, that 1\* is a very controversial assumption. It is noted that no principled reason to assume that knowledge internalism is incompatible with an RA epistemology has been given. Moreover, Kallestrup and Pritchard's formulation of knowledge internalism, EIK, suggests that it is an RA theory of knowledge. But the incompatibilist argument hinges on the assumption that it cannot be. I am inclined to think that a *prima facie* reason for upholding this controversial assumption is required to yield even a *prima facie* conclusion that knowledge internalism and content externalism are incompatible.<sup>12</sup> The third point is that the incompatibility holds, at best, between content externalism and a version of knowledge internalism, EIK, which may be regarded as a straw man by most knowledge internalists. This point does not address the force of the argument. But it bears importantly on the relevance of it. Even if the argument's conclusion were true, it would not provide reason – not even *prima facie* reason – to assume that any more prevalent, less radical versions of knowledge internalism, such as IK, are incompatible with content externalism. So, three of the five points undermine the argument insofar as it is a *prima facie* argument in the second – substantive – sense. If the first three objections are correct, the argument fails to provide even *prima facie* reason to assume incompatibilism.

The fourth point is trickier. It compromises the argument insofar as it purports to motivate a *prima facie* conclusion which involves internalism about ordinary knowledge rather than a much more restricted one about internalism about self-knowledge. I re-emphasize that the fifth point only suggests a way in which the knowledge internalist may attempt to argue that the incompatibility is *merely prima facie*.

## Conclusion

It is crucial to note that epistemic internalism and content externalism come in many versions. I have only considered the versions which Kallestrup and Pritchard target vis-à-vis the argument they set forth. I have not argued that more radical versions of knowledge internalism and content externalism are compatible. It may well be that certain radical versions of content externalism and knowledge internalism are incompatible.<sup>13</sup> However, it is reasonable to draw a modest methodological moral from the present discussion: No incompatibility should be presupposed without argument.

As mentioned, Kallestrup and Pritchard note, with appropriate caution, that their argument only provides *prima facie* motivation for assuming incompatibility between content externalism and knowledge internalism. While the counter-arguments above challenge even this guarded conclusion, they are hardly conclusive.

<sup>12</sup>Kallestrup and Pritchard have questioned this inclination (in correspondence). However, even if we assume that the argument does establish inconsistency *prima facie*, the second point is simply that there is a way for the knowledge-internalist to avoid it: By adopting an RA epistemology.

<sup>13</sup>In particular, it may be that versions of content externalism according to which representational mental states are object or kind dependent will give rise to incompatibility. See (Brown 2007) for an interesting discussion of related issues.

Several ends have been left loose. So, it seems appropriate to conclude that internalism about knowledge and externalism about content, as characterized, are *secunda facie* compatible. But, of course, the *ultimate* verdict depends on how these ends are ultimately tied.

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