

# Of Boundaries and Metaphysical Starting Points: Why the Extended Mind Cannot Be So Lightly Dismissed

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# Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Otto and Inga
- 3 Intuitions and metaphysical biases
- 4 The argument from concepts
- 5 Implications

# Abstract

The extended mind debate is, to large extent, a debate over where and how to locate the boundary between cognitive mind and non-cognitive world. Concepts of “internal” and “external”, taken from the domain of physical volumes, are metaphorical, at best, applied to entities like mind. Strongly held intuitions betray metaphysical starting points that prejudice the debate. If one does not accept these starting points, then the “just obvious” claims made by critics of extended mind are far less clear. The mind/world distinction is, ultimately, a conceptual one, and like most if not all conceptual distinctions, subject to shift over time.

Introduction

Otto and Inga

Intuitions and metaphysical biases

The argument from concepts

Implications

Conclusions

# The Extended Mind



# Extended Mind Hypothesis



*“Proponents of the extended mind story hold that even quite familiar human mental states (e.g., states of believing that so and so) can be realized, in part, by structures and processes located outside the human head. Such claims go far beyond the important but far less challenging assertion that human cognizing leans heavily on various forms of external scaffolding and support. Instead, they paint mind itself (or better, the physical machinery that realizes some of our cognitive processes and mental states) as, under humanly attainable conditions, extending beyond the bounds of skin and skull.” – Andy Clark, Supersizing the Mind*

## Principal claims

- Form of what Clark and Chalmers call *active externalism*.
- Any version of mind/brain identity (e.g., Churchland's *eliminativism*) is rejected. Mind is neither the same as nor reducible to brain; and in particular, they need not share the same boundary with respect to the world.
- It is important, but insufficient, to stress the rich interactions between *embodied* cognitive agent and the environment in which it is *embedded*. At least some of those interactions are sufficiently rich as to blur the lines between the two.

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# The Parity Principle



*“If, as we confront some task, a part of the world functions as a process which, were it done in the head, we would have no hesitation in recognizing as part of the cognitive process, then that part of the world is (so we claim) part of the cognitive process.”* – Andy Clark and Dave Chalmers, *The Extended Mind*

## What this means

- *Intuition pump.*
- Not making an *empirical* claim (observable, testable) but a *metaphysical* (axiomatic) and *normative* one.
- No “fetish for the bodily boundary” (Robert Rupert).

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# Figure and ground



# Personal boundaries

- Three ways of cashing out the boundary:
  - Self and non-self (*fundamental*).
  - Self and other (*social*).
  - Self and world (*ecological*)
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## Conceptual boundaries

- The distinction is, at heart, a *conceptual* not an *ontologically prior* one.
- Concepts change.
  - Too little, and they cannot adapt to changing circumstances.
  - Too much, and the whole conceptual system breaks down!
- Because concepts change, boundaries between concepts change.

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## How they are (meant to be) alike

- Both have a desire to attend a certain art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art.
- Both have the belief “the Museum of Modern Art is on West 53rd Street”.
- For both, that belief is *non-occurrent*.
  - Acquired.
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# What's wrong with Otto

- Real-life plausibility: Alzheimer's doesn't work that way.
- Bigger problem: Clark and Chalmers fail to pick out what is distinctive about Otto.
- Two horns of the dilemma:
  - *Either* Otto is a very special and rare case, in which case extended mind is real but not very important,
  - *Or* the example really does generalize, but one (potentially) ends up with mind being everywhere!
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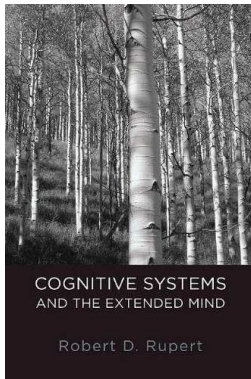
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# Cognitive bloat



*“A human might design a computer, then drop dead. No one, I hope, would be tempted to say that, because of her explanatorily causal contribution to the computer’s later processing, the designer’s corpse partly constitutes the machine’s computational processes.” – Robert Rupert*

## Intuitions and counter-intuitions

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- All of the critics acknowledge a powerful *counter*-intuition that, basically, extended mind is crazy.
- That said, they take intuitions to be things one can and should put (entirely) aside: “*The average person’s intuition-based applications of ‘cognition’, even the well-informed theorist’s reactions, should not be trusted to reflect the actual structure of cognition – unless, of course, the subject has in hand the correct theory of cognition*”.
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## Realism and anti-realism

- **Direct realism**: The apparent transparency of the world should, in most cases at least, be taken at face value.
- **Indirect realism**: If the apparent transparency of the world cannot be taken at face value, it can, by critical examination and reflection, be reconstructed.
- **Anti-realism**: While the mind-independent world is conceded logically to exist, one cannot say anything about it, beyond its bare existence and its ongoing role in constraining experience.
- **Pragmatism**: Go with the explanation that *works*.
- **Pluralism**: It's fine to have multiple, competing explanations if the different explanations all perform equally well. Practically or, perhaps, even theoretically, there need be no single fact of the matter.

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So long as one does not try to hold both perspectives at once, there is no contradiction in defending both!

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## Boundaries and continua

- Even perhaps the clearest of physical boundaries – that of the cell wall – is only clear to a point.
- Problem becomes much, much worse when one moves away from the boundary of the organism as a *biological agent* to the boundary of the organism as a *cognitive agent*.
- Rupert's *system-based criterion* for determining cognitive boundaries seems to assume the very boundary it claims to be finding!
- Where does:
  - The *I* stop and the *you* or the *we* begin?
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## Representations internal and external

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## The role of the observer



*“The underlying assumption of many is that a real world exists independently of any observer; and that symbols are entities that can ‘stand for’ objects in this real world in some abstract and absolute sense. In practice, the role of the observer in the act of representing something is ignored. . . . The gun I reach for when I hear the word **representation** has this engraved on it: ‘When **P** is used by **Q** to represent **R** to **S**, who is **Q** and who is **S**?’”* – Inman Harvey (1992), *Untimed and Misrepresented*

## Cognitivism and enactivism

- For all that Rupert claims the **embodiment** mantle, his approach is remarkably traditionally cognitivist (SMPA) in a way that can, much of the time, safely disregard embodiment.
- On the other extreme, one has some of the so-called **social constructivists**, lampooned for making it sound like it's all socially constructed.
- Sitting in the middle, enactivism:
  - Understands cognition, at least in the first instance, as a **skillful ability**.
  - Claims an ineliminable role for the observer: first-person perspective.
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## What is known is brought forth



*“I have proposed using the term enactive to . . . evoke the idea that what is known is brought forth, in contraposition to the more classical views of either cognitivism or connectionism.”* –  
Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, the  
Tree of Knowledge

## The nature of concepts

- If anything bears the *mark of the cognitive*, concepts do; so if concepts bleed into the world, so does cognition!
- Untendentious that our structured understandings of the world are conceptually mediated – but how transparent are the concepts to the pre- or non-conceptual world?
- Is there a pre- or non-conceptual Given that justifies our conceptually structured beliefs and experience?

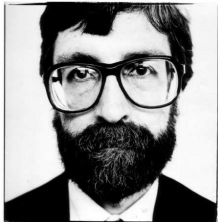
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## The Myth of the Given



*“The idea that “experience, conceived in such a way that it could not be a tribunal, is nevertheless supposed to stand in judgment over our empirical thinking.”* – John McDowell, *Mind and World*

## Mind and world

- ***Prima facie***, there are things that are concepts and things that are not, with a clear division between the two.
- But to reflect upon either is to bring them *into* the space of concepts! Now there are concepts of concepts and concepts of non-concepts.
- That invites another step back... and another... and another...
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## The problem with physicalism

- **Untendentious version**: The universe appears to be made of one kind of stuff – physical stuff. All things equal, an account of the universe based on one kind of stuff is preferable to one based on two (or more).
- **Hidden assumption I**: We understand what physical stuff is.
- **Hidden assumption II**: All dualisms are *bad*!
- **Hidden assumption III**: Physicalism implies some form of metaphysical realism.
- **Hidden assumption III**: Physical explanations should – at least in general – be neatly spatiotemporally localizable ones with clearly defined boundaries.
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## Implications for physicalism

- Mind (*mental* stuff) just doesn't neatly separate from world (*physical* stuff). Mind is tangled up with world.
- May push one toward some form of neutral monism: the world does not exist either of *physical* stuff or *mental* stuff – as generally understood – but one kind of stuff that has aspects of both and must be viewed from two, irreconcilable and seemingly contradictory perspectives.
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- **The** hot paradigm, the *soup de jour* of cognitive science and analytic philosophy.
- Tendency in some circles to try to give a neuroscientific slant to everything.
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- Won't expect to find *either* kind of NCC.
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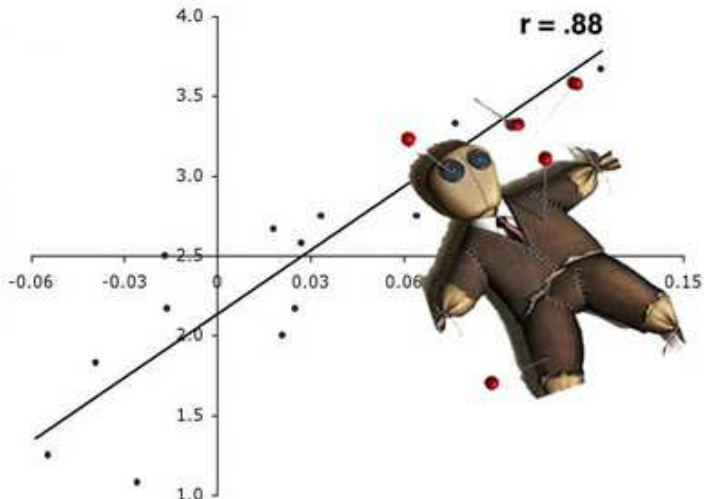
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## Voodoo correlations!



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## Empirical investigations

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- Theories of concepts not subject to *direct* empirical testing.
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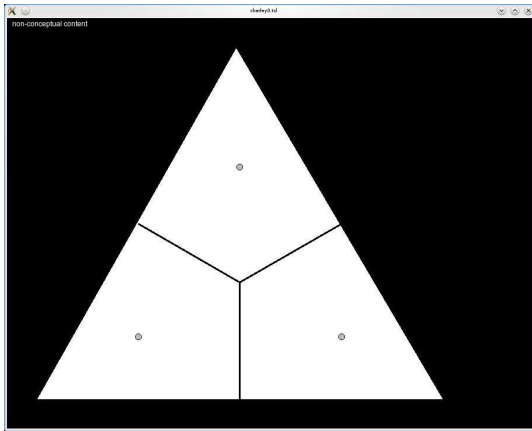
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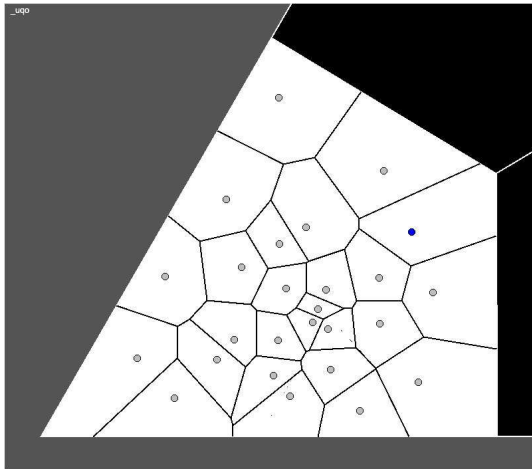
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# Charley



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## Conclusions

- A little extended mind goes a long way!
- An overly rigid boundary fails to do justice to our experience in the world.
- An overly flexible boundary threatens to collapse altogether.
- An over concern with the “literal” facts of the matter reflects hidden metaphysical agendas.
- If concepts do not neatly and cleanly separate out from non-concepts – if any conceptual residue even *could* remain – then mind, in a substantive sense extends into world.
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## Coda

One need not maintain – as McDowell is often read – that the world we encounter is fully conceptual, which would lead to cognitive bloat; only that there is no part of that world that is fully or reliably free of the conceptual touch. Such cognitive tentacles into the world are all that the extended mind hypothesis, on my reading, requires.