

EN_91998699 Review of A Research Paper

In “The Extended Mind”, written by Andy Clark and David Chalmers, they set out to answer the question “Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?”, using a new kind of externalism they call ‘active externalism’. Their main claim is that cognitive processes do not just exist in the brain. They use two different types of actions: epistemic action, which “alter the world so as to aid and augment cognitive processes such as recognition and search”, and pragmatic actions, which “alter the world because some physical change is desirable for its own sake” (8). Epistemic actions are part of the cognitive process, as a part of the world functions in the process just like cognitive processes do. The interaction between the human and the external entity present in a certain epistemic action creates a coupled system – were one to be removed, the process would cease to work. They compare active externalism to standard externalism, in which external features to an action are passive unless interacted with. In active externalism, the external features are active and coupled to the human organism.

They use different examples to substantiate their claim. First, they use an example with a computer screen, a person and geometric shapes. The person can either 1) rotate the shapes in their mind to align them with the correct sockets, 2) rotate the shapes in their mind, or physically rotate them on screen using a button to align them with the correct sockets, or 3) be neurologically linked to the computer, and either rotate the shapes in their mind or be able to physically rotate them by willing them to rotate to align them with the correct sockets. Clark and Chalmers argue that all these examples, despite the different or absent physical interactions between objects, are the same on a cognitive level. Another example used is that of scrabble. When rearranging the tiles on a tray, this process is not part of direct action, but rather part of thought. Yet another example is language itself, about which they claim that “[Language] appears to be a central means by which cognitive processes are extended into the world. [...] It may be that language evolved, to enable such extensions of our cognitive resources” (11). These examples show how closely internal cognitive processes are tied to the external world.

A counter-argument is that many people intuitively feel this externalism to be unfitting. These people may think the cognitive is closely connected to the conscious, which does not exist outside of the head. Clark and Chalmers bring up the fact that not all cognitive processes are also conscious processes. Examples such as memories, linguistic knowledge and so forth are used to illustrate this fact. This means that the idea that cognitive processes are external while conscious ones are internal can coexist. A different argument against active externalism is the argument that cognitive processes have to be portable; the mind must be able to carry out its functions and processes regardless of the environment it exists in at a certain moment.

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