

# Extended cognition

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## Article Summary

Extended cognition takes the idea that your mind is ‘on’ your smartphone literally. It says that human cognitive states and processes sometimes spill outside our heads and into objects in our environment. Alleged examples include not just smartphones, but also use of simpler technology (pencil and paper to perform a calculation), our own body (ticking off our fingers when we count), and other people (our spouse who remembers appointments so we don’t have to).

There are three main arguments for extended cognition.

*Functionalist* arguments rely on similarities in functional structure between extended processes and (actual or possible) internal cognitive processes. Cognition extends because the physical mechanisms that support it ‘work the same way’ in both cases. *Inference to the best explanation* arguments canvas explanatory benefits that extended cognition would bring to psychology. We should believe that cognition extends because it would make our psychological theories more unified, elegant, and fruitful. *Second wave* arguments emphasise the way our brains integrate with our environment. Cognition extends because brains, bodies, and environment are so tightly intertwined that, when we solve certain cognitive tasks, they count as a single system.

Extended cognition is attacked on many fronts. It has been claimed that it generates *absurdly high levels of extension* (‘cognitive bloat’); that it is inferior to the more conservative hypothesis of *embedded cognition*; that arguments for it confuse *causal*

*coupling with constitution*; and that its key cases fail to satisfy some *mark of the cognitive*.

Extended cognition concerns only the cognitive, information-processing aspects of mental life. It has, however, inspired similar claims about extension for other aspects of the mind, including conscious experience, emotions, moods, intentional agency, knowledge, and selfhood.

Extended cognition is part of a wider ‘4E cognition’ research programme. The four Es stand for extended, embedded, embodied, and enactive cognition. Each E offers a closely related, albeit distinct perspective on the role of the environment in cognition. Other forms of externalism about the mind – [content externalism](#), [direct realism about perception](#), [collective intentionality](#), and [group cognition](#) – are less closely related to extended cognition.

## 1 Extended cognition

Humans love their devices. Smartphones, tablets, computers, paper notebooks, calendars, and to-do lists play a pervasive role in our lives. These pieces of technology cause us to behave and to think in certain ways, and we in turn modify them to influence our future thought and behaviour. Often we don’t appreciate how much we rely on them until they’re gone. Empirical work in psychology suggests that this dependence runs very deep. Even during relatively undemanding tasks – e.g. copying a simple coloured pattern made of puzzle pieces – we off-load information processing onto the environment to reduce work for our brains (Ballard et al., 1997). Once one recognises this, one sees it everywhere: a bartender lines up cocktail glasses of different shapes to remember a complex order, a mathematician uses pencil and paper to guide her steps in a calculation, a child uses her fingers to count off days until her next birthday. These observations reveal that intelligent, adaptive human thought and behaviour need not always be produced by the brain alone. It often involves a two-way symbiotic interaction between the brain, body, and world. (Dennett, 1996; Hutchins, 1995; Simon, 1969).

The hypothesis of extended cognition (HEC) goes beyond this relatively uncontroversial observation in a controversial way. Environmental processes don’t merely interact with our brain processes to produce intelligent thought and behaviour. Those environmental processes *have as much claim to be mental or cognitive* as their brain-based collaborators. Human cognition literally extends into smartphones, tablets, notebooks, to-do lists, and cocktail glasses.

**HEC** Some actual human cognitive states/processes extend outside our brains to include, as parts, states/processes in the environment

HEC is frequently misunderstood, so it is worth taking care here.

HEC applies the slightly puzzling concept of ‘extension’ to cognitive processes. It is important to realise that HEC is not a claim about cognition considered in some abstract otherworldly sense, or about cognition considered from the first-person phenomenological point of view. It is a claim about cognition’s physical, mechanistic basis. That physical basis has a location and an extent. Traditional wisdom has it that the physical basis of human cognition (its ‘realiser’ in functionalist terms) is located exclusively inside the human brain. HEC says that this is false: sometimes, a mix of brain and environmental states/processes underlie (realise) cognition.

For our purposes, what counts as the ‘environment’ is roughly anything outside the brain or central nervous system. Thus, your cognition could extend into external technology (smartphones, notebooks), your non-neural body (fingers, limbs, tendons), naturally occurring objects around you (useful sticks and stones), tokens of public language (appropriate sound waves and ink marks), or the brains of trusted people (your spouse).

There are several claims that are often mistakenly associated with HEC.

HEC does not say that the environment is as ‘important’ as the brain for cognition. The brain may remain the principal player behind human thought and behaviour. HEC simply says that it is not the *only* player: the brain is not the sole physical basis of human cognition (see Clark, 2007a, on ‘organism-centered’ cognition). HEC does not say anything either about ‘how much’ of human cognition extends. It is compatible with some, even most, episodes of human cognition being internal and wholly brain-based; only *some* instances of human cognition need extend. HEC is also silent about whether extended cognition is a ‘good thing’ for the agent in question. Sometimes it is (e.g. when a smartphone increases your memory capacity or improves your calculating ability), but sometimes it isn’t (e.g. when it reinforces unhealthy cognitive biases or sustains pathological worries about bodily self image, see Sprevak, 2011; Borsboom, Cramer and Kalis, 2018). HEC is also silent about whether an instance of extended cognition is a result of some deliberate choice by the agent in question (or anyone else). We are often drawn into entanglements with the environment without our awareness or consent. Finally, HEC does not say anything about objects like smartphones having an independent mental life of their own. As far as HEC is concerned, a smartphone sitting by itself need have no more mental life than a neuron sitting alone in a Petri dish. It is only when a smartphone (or a neuron) stands in the right relationship to the rest of our brain that it becomes part of our cognitive life and thereby endowed with mental/cognitive properties.

## 2 Arguments for extended cognition

There are three main arguments for the hypothesis of extended cognition (HEC). All three appear in Clark and Chalmers' (1998) original paper and each can be illustrated using their (now classic) thought experiment:

Inga has normal human memory. One day, she hears of an interesting exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Inga thinks, recalls that MoMA is on 53rd Street, and sets off. Otto suffers from a mild form of Alzheimer's disease and he always writes down useful information in his notebook. On the same day, Otto also hears of the exhibition at MoMA, retrieves the address from his notebook, and sets off.

Clark and Chalmers say that Otto has a belief that MoMA is on 53rd Street. This belief – and Otto's cognitive processes associated with storing and recalling it – extend outside Otto's brain and into his notebook. Before proceeding to the arguments, it is worth noting that this is not meant to be a realistic description of Alzheimer's disease or any other real life case. Clark and Chalmers are using a thought experiment to draw attention to a set of simplified interactions with the environment that would give rise to extended cognition. They claim that more complex versions of these interactions occur in real life (e.g. in smartphone use).

*Functionalism arguments.* The main idea here is that Otto and Inga are similar in ways that matter to the philosophical theory of functionalism. Functionalism says that the functional role of a physical state/process determines whether that state/process is mental/cognitive. A functionalist about beliefs says that what makes a brain state a belief is that it functions in a way appropriate to a belief. Clark and Chalmers observe that Otto's notebook functions for Otto at least roughly in the same way as Inga's biological memory functions for her. The state of Otto's notebook interacts with his desires and other beliefs in a similar way as that in which the state of Inga's biological memory interacts with her desires and other beliefs. Exposure to new information causes Otto to modify the state of his notebook. Exposure to new information causes Inga to modify the state of her biological memory. Otto's notebook causes him to stop at 53rd Street. Inga's biological memory causes her to stop at 53rd Street. The 'coarse-grained' functional role of the stored information seems to be the same in both cases. Clark and Chalmers conclude that just as Inga has a belief that MoMA is on 53rd Street, so Otto has a belief (partly realised in his notebook), with the same content.

The argument relies on accepting functionalism about beliefs, but also on 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. (Clark and Chalmers, 1998, p. 8)

The parity principle says that we should not be to any degree *prejudiced* against treating Otto's notebook as realising one of his cognitive states merely because it is outside his head. Recent versions of the functionalist argument for HEC exploit the parity principle to block an obvious objection to the original functionalist argument: that Otto's notebook and Inga's biological memory are not *exactly* alike in their functional roles. This flaw was pressed by early critics of HEC (Adams and Aizawa, 2001; Rupert, 2004). Otto and Inga are not functional duplicates, but consider that Otto *is* functionally identical to a hypothetical intelligent being who uses a notebook inside its head to store information (e.g. a Martian who uses internal ink-marks to encode some of its memory). If it is *possible* for an intelligent being to have an internal memory system that functions exactly like Otto's notebook, and we accept both the parity principle and functionalism, then we should conclude that Otto's *actual* notebook counts as a case of extended cognition. (For a discussion of this argument, see Sprevak, 2009)

*Inference to the best explanation.* The claim here is that HEC affords some *explanatory advantage* to psychology. This argument takes the form of an *inference to the best explanation* (IBE). We should infer that HEC is true because of the explanatory benefits its acceptance would bring to psychology. For example, Clark and Chalmers say that HEC would unify otherwise distinct patterns of human thought and behaviour. Otto and Inga provide a simple illustration. Inga arrived at 53rd Street because she *wanted* to go to MoMA and *believed* that it was there. If HEC is true, then Otto arrived at 53rd Street because he *wanted* to go to MoMA and *believed* that it was there. If we assume HEC, we can describe both individuals as instantiating the same belief–desire decision-making architecture, irrespective of whether they use internal or external resources for information storage. The alternative – explaining Otto's thought and behaviour always in terms of his internal beliefs *about* his notebook – seems, by contrast, to bring with it unnecessary complexity. The notebook is a constant in Otto's life, similar to Inga's biological memory. It seems redundant to point to it in every explanation of his behaviour. Accepting HEC appears to make the notion of belief in psychology 'deeper and more unified, and ... more useful in explanation.' (Clark and Chalmers, 1998, p. 14). (For a discussion of this argument, see Sprevak, 2010)

*Second wave arguments.* 'Second wave' arguments tend to downplay the considerations behind the functionalist and IBE arguments; they instead emphasise 'complementarity'. What is meant by this is that external states and processes need not be

similar – either functionally or in terms of their potential role in explanation – to any internal ones. Instead, what justifies HEC is a tight, reciprocal *integration* between brains, bodies, and the environment. The ‘second wave’ approach has affinities with dynamical systems theory, which models the brain, body, and environment as a single system whose elements cannot be prised apart when solving a cognitive task (Thelen and Smith, 1994). In their original paper, Clark and Chalmers call this ‘active externalism’: all parts (internal and external) are ‘active’ and work together in a non-redundant way to solve a cognitive task. The resulting interaction need not be similar to any (actual or possible) internal cognitive process and there is no reason why it should be classified as such by psychology. Otto’s notebook isn’t cognitive because it is functionally like Inga’s memory, or because is explanatorily beneficial for psychology to group them together. Otto’s notebook is part of his cognitive life because it is systematically, reciprocally, and inextricably integrated with Otto’s brain during certain cognitive tasks. This integration is meant to be more than merely a tight two-way causal relationship between Otto’s brain and world; it is also supposed to have a normative character: the integration arises from and it is maintained by social practices, norms, and institutions. (For a reconstruction of second-wave arguments, see Menary, 2010a; Sutton, 2010). (Note that talk of a ‘second wave’ may suggest that the ‘first wave’ was a failure, but it is by no means clear that either the functionalist or IBE arguments cannot be made to work.)

### 3 Objections to extended cognition

The hypothesis of extended cognition (HEC) has, unsurprisingly, encountered considerable resistance. Here are four common objections.

*Cognitive bloat.* Fans of HEC want to say that human cognition extends in certain cases and to a certain degree. However, they usually don’t want to claim *too much* extension: that extension happens so much that our existing mental concepts are rendered pointless, absurd, or unfit for purpose (e.g. that we end up saying you believe everything on the Internet or that you and I believe the same things just because we happen to live in the same environment). This is called the problem of ‘cognitive bloat’. Avoiding cognitive bloat requires drawing a line between those relationships with the environment (functional/explanatory/integrational) that entail reasonable amounts of cognitive extension and those that do not. This has not proved easy. Consider that not only your smartphone, but also your office computer, local library, friends, co-workers, and in many cases the whole Internet, contains information on which you routinely draw to guide your behaviour in a way not dissimilar that in which Otto relies on his notebook. Consider too that you and I often draw on the same set of environmental resources to guide our respective behaviours. An argument for HEC needs to guard against becoming a *reductio ad*

*absurdum* of the view that it is attempting to support. Introducing restrictions to avoid cognitive bloat, however, may cut against assumptions required to motivate any form of HEC at all – for example, they may violate the parity principle (see Sprevak, 2009).

*Embedded cognition.* The hypothesis of ‘embedded cognition’ (HEMC) is an alternative to HEC that appears to offer all of HEC’s explanatory benefits but without the ‘cost’ of saying that notebooks have mental/cognitive properties. HEMC and HEC agree on most of the key points: extended processes are functionally similar to internal cognitive processes; grouping extended and internal processes together is sometimes useful in explanation; brains are causally integrated with the environment when we solve certain cognitive problems. HEMC and HEC differ in that HEC says that extended cognitive processes are 100% mental/cognitive whereas HEMC says that only the internal, brain-based portions of those processes are mental/cognitive. According to HEMC, extended processes are hybrids composed of separate mental and non-mental parts – the mental parts residing exclusively inside the head. According to HEC, extended processes have an unalloyed mental/cognitive nature, inside and out. Critics of HEC argue that we should abandon HEC for HEMC because HEMC provides the benefits of HEC but it is more ontologically parsimonious (it attributes fewer mental/cognitive properties to the world) and it is more conservative (it fits better with traditional internalist psychology) (see Rupert, 2004; Sprevak, 2010).

*The coupling/constitution fallacy.* Extended cognition describes a two-way coupling relationship between our brains and the environment. One might be tempted to think that cognition extends *because* of this coupling relationship. However, just because X and Y are coupled does not mean that X is part of Y. The expansion of a bimetallic strip in a thermostat is causally coupled to the motion of atoms in the surrounding air in the room, but that does not mean that the strip’s expansion is a process that extends into the atoms of the air (Adams and Aizawa, 2007, p. 91). Similarly, brains and the environment may be causally coupled but that does not mean that brain processes extend into the environment. This objection appears to most directly threaten ‘second wave’ arguments for extended cognition, since those arguments emphasise tight, two-way causal coupling between the brain, body, and environment. An advocate of HEC needs to identify something beyond causal coupling that justifies cognitive extension. A natural resort would be to appeal to either the *explanatory value* of treating the coupled system as cognitive or the *functional similarity* between the coupled system and an internal (actual or possible) case of cognition. However, this would collapse ‘second wave’ arguments into their ‘first wave’ versions (see Adams and Aizawa, 2001; Adams and Aizawa, 2007). Alternatively, a defender of ‘second wave’ arguments might emphasise the normative dimensions of the causal coupling – that it is introduced and maintained by social



practices, norms, and institutions.

*The mark of the cognitive.* A ‘mark of the cognitive’ is set of conditions that are either necessary or sufficient for a physical state/process to be cognitive. A mark of the cognitive is often discussed as part of attempts to find an impasse between philosophers who disagree about HEC. If advocates and critics of HEC can agree on a mark of the cognitive, they could use this to decide whether disputed cases (like Otto’s notebook) really are cases of extended cognition. Proposed marks of the cognitive, however, tend to be at least as controversial as the cases they are supposed to help decide. Proposals include: (i) that a cognitive process must involve non-derived representational content and be functionally similar to actual cases of internal, brain-based human cognition (Adams and Aizawa, 2007); (ii) that a cognitive process must be part of an integrated persisting system and causally contribute to a wide range of cognitive phenomena (Rupert, 2009); (iii) that a cognitive process ‘belong’ to a subject in the sense of causally contributing to the intentional content of that subject’s personal-level states (Rowlands, 2010). Critics of HEC tend to favour ‘conservative’ marks of the cognitive, like (i) or (ii), which rule out many cases of extended cognition. Fans of HEC tend to favour ‘liberal’ marks of the cognitive of, like (iii), which let in many cases of extended cognition. There is currently no consensus about which is the right mark of the cognitive. In the face of seemingly intractable disagreements, one might worry whether there even is such thing as a mark of the cognitive. Just as there is no agreed mark that determines which physical processes are *healthy*, *living*, or *cancerous*, so there might be no similar mark that determines which processes are *cognitive* (Allen, 2017).

#### 4 Extended cognition’s kindred views

Philosophical work has focused, not just on arguments for and objections against the hypothesis of extended cognition (HEC), but also on tracing HEC’s connections to other externalist claims about the mind. Two types of view related to HEC stand out: claims about other aspects of the mind extending, and other forms of philosophical externalism about cognition.

*Other aspects of the mind extending.* Clark and Chalmers (1998) carefully restricted their original extended-mind claim to the cognitive, information-processing aspects of mental life (e.g. storage and retrieval of the information that underlie some of our beliefs). They flagged conscious experience as an aspect of the mind that escapes their arguments: an area where the physical mechanisms are likely to be entirely brain-based. Noë (2004) disagrees: using variants of the IBE and second-wave arguments of §2, he argues that the physical mechanisms that support visual conscious experience often extend outside the brain and into the human body and



environment. Clark (2009) replies that while such extension is possible in principle, it is unlikely to happen because our brain's causal interface with the world (our eyes and our hands) has a narrow bandwidth, which (information-rich) conscious experience cannot cross.

Consciousness is not the only source of novel claims about mental extension. Carter, Gordon and Palermos (2016) argue that emotions extend when the physical processes involved in an emotion's component of *cognitive appraisal* extend. Colombetti and Roberts (2015) argue that all kinds of affective mental states (emotions, moods, sentiments, and temperaments) can extend if external objects are used to regulate those affective states. Vierkant (2014) argues that intentional agency and *willpower* can extend. Pritchard (2010); Carter and Kallestrup (2016) explore extension claims for epistemic states like *knowledge*. Clark (2007b) argues that selfhood extends. Essays in Anderson et al. (2018) explore extension claims about yet further aspects of the mind, including processes that differ dramatically from the task-based, problem-solving examples favoured by Clark and Chalmers (e.g. friendship and imaginative engagement with a text).

*Other forms of externalism about cognition.* HEC is often described as part of the research programme of '4E cognition'. The other three Es are *embedded*, *embodied*, and *enactive* cognition. We have already met *embedded* cognition in the context of the hypothesis of 'embedded cognition' (see §3). *Embodied* cognition says that cognition depends in some way – different versions of embodied cognition cash this out differently – on the physical nature of our bodies. Embodied cognition may be used to express a version of HEC: cognition is embodied because our physical bodies partly realise our cognitive processes (e.g. when a child counts on her fingers, her mathematical cognition extends into the physical movement of her ten digits). However, embodied cognition may also be used to express quite different claims about embodiment. Lakoff and Johnson say that the human body influences the semantic content of our concepts, including abstract logical and mathematical concepts (Johnson, 2007), something about which HEC has almost nothing to say. *Enactive* cognition says that cognition is constituted by a looping interaction between perception and bodily action that involves brain, body, and the world. This has obvious affinity with 'second wave' arguments for HEC (§2), but versions of enactivism might differ in various ways from HEC in how they say this integration works. Some enactivists reject HEC's typical framing in terms of representations and information processing. 'Sensorimotor' enactivists say that cognition is constituted by implicit, non-representational bodily skills (Noë, 2004). 'Autopoietic' enactivists say that cognition is constituted by biologically-inspired relationships, such as autopoiesis, adaptivity, and sense-making (Di Paolo, 2005).

HEC bears a rather more distant relationship to other kinds of philosophical ex-

ternalism, such as content externalism, direct realism about perception, collective intentionality, and group cognition. [Content externalism](#) claims that the representational content of human cognitive states does not supervene on the physical state of our brains alone. HEC has almost nothing to say about the supervenience base of this representational content. Its claim is exclusively about the location of the physical vehicles that carry that content (Hurley, 2010). [Direct realism about perception](#) says that perception involves standing in a special relation to a real external object beyond the brain. HEC assumes almost nothing about whether this theory of perception is correct. Indeed, HEC is frequently stated in intentionalist (as opposed to direct-realist) terms. [Collective intentionality](#) is the claim that groups sometimes share mental states, such as belief, knowledge, and intention. Closely related to this is the notion of [group cognition](#): a cognitive state or process that is properly attributed to a group of individuals rather than to the individuals that compose that group. What HEC has in common with these ideas is that cognitive states and processes need not reside exclusively inside individual human brains. However, unlike these two ideas, HEC is a claim about individual cognition, not group cognition. HEC is compatible with, but need not assert, the existence of collective mental states or group minds. HEC makes a separate, unique claim about how the mind spreads out into world.

## Related Articles

- [Belief](#)
- [Collective intentionality](#)
- [Consciousness](#)
- [Content: Wide and narrow](#)
- [Emotions, nature of](#)
- [Functionalism](#)
- [Inference to the best explanation](#)
- [Perception](#)
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## Articles that might consider linking to this article

- [Belief](#)
- [Collective intentionality](#)
- [Content: Wide and narrow](#)
- [Functionalism](#)
- [Metaphysics of knowledge](#)

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(The will and intentional agency extend outside the head.)
- Wheeler, M. (2005). *Reconstructing the Cognitive World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.  
(Explores links between extended cognition and phenomenological ideas about embodiment in Heidegger.)